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Field Practicum

Incomplete Make-Up

From Educators to the Educated:

Challenges, Faults and New Approaches

In a letter printed by the Mountain Express, Robert K. White, founder of the Pisgah View community gardening project, writes a plea for preserving the project area. Mr. White's plea contextualizes many of the tensions, truths, and ambiguities I encountered while volunteering with the Pisgah View Homework Club, an Americorps initiative, for my Field Practicum course last semester. The letter also expresses a bit of righteous anger on the dissonance of cultural realities in Pisgah View, between white and black Asheville, and the false pretenses with which these groups access one another.

"Take another look at Pisgah View"
by Robert K. White in Vol. 13 / Iss. 51 on 07/18/2007

I live in Pisgah View Apartments, along with my wife and three daughters. During my seven years here, I have seen some horrible things; I have also seen some absolutely wonderful things that give me great hope for the future of Asheville and humanity. But I have seen so much emphasis and media coverage of the negative, and I wonder why an equal amount of time and space is not given to the good things going on here.

If I insinuated that the bias in reporting is racist in intent, there would be a hue and cry that I am playing the race card unfairly. Yet with all the bumper stickers that proclaim "End Racism," it seems someone would stand up and admit that this practice—which all but a few diehards claim to deplore—is the catalyst that has caused the breakdown in the African-American community.

By no stretch of the imagination am I saying that anyone is guilty for the bad choices being made in my community—after all, we may not choose the conditions under which we live, but we are responsible for the way we choose to overcome them.

What I *am* saying is this: There is no superior race, but there are superior people in all races. When will those who have the power and authority focus on those who do care and who do want to be a part of a positive change, rather than point at the few (yes, it is only a few) who make the bad choices and use those few to continue to subjugate a people?

I lose count of the news reports of increased funding for more police or a new jail, yet I know it costs more to house a human being in prison than to educate them.

We have a member of the City Council who has made it his life's work to eradicate drugs in public housing, yet all he has placed in our community to fill the void of the drug dealer are some trash cans. Like it or not, the drug dealer is a source of income to many, and the sale of drugs is about economics. Ask any drug dealer if he or she had a choice, would drug dealing be their first choice—the resounding answer would be "No!" The truth is that the government of this great country has declared that a family of five making less than $50,000 a year is living in poverty. In this community, most of us live on less than $10,000 a year. What do you call that? Ultra-extreme poverty? Yet when there was a push to raise the minimum wage, we all saw the resistance.

Perhaps the greatest mystery to me is the number of whites that are flocking to Africa. The same people don't even have the decency to own up to their racism here, but are so concerned about dark skin halfway around the world. Do they fear becoming victims of the uncivilized nature of those their very ancestors deliberately stole, destroying all vestiges of cultures and beliefs, forbidding the right to education and even the right to their own offspring? This is not ancient history. This is still going on. It is done now by social-service agencies and the criminal-justice system. It is done by using a different yardstick to mete out punishment and judgment when someone's skin is dark.

I implore all of you who marched to free Mumia to look right here at home. See that injustice is only a step away—in the Buncombe County Jail.

— Robert K. White
Asheville

**Introduction**

I grew up in Watauga County, in the upper corner of Western North Carolina. It is a mountainous region, known as the High Country. The county is roughly 92% White, 4% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 2% other.[1] As a kid, I had little to no cultural diversity besides that which was taught in school. In high school, I only had one black friend (there were only ten African-Americans enrolled at Watauga High), and I knew him from the

[1] http://www.city-data.com/township/Boone-Watauga-NC.html

football team. His name was Ninnettu Marlou, the son of Nigerian immigrants. His older brother and mine were good friends, so with encouragement, we hung out fairly regularly at the beginning of our sophomore year. But as swiftly as our friendship began, it sooner ended. One day in practice, he got into a fight with our team captain, Adam, and left him with a black eye and a missing front tooth. The next week, Ninnettu found a noose hung in his locker.

Adam didn't receive an ounce of punishment though he had all but admitted to the act when the coach asked the team who had done it and Adam responded, "Fuck that nigger. Let him leave. He's a shitty running back anyhow." The coach, seeming perfectly ignorant, scolded Adam for using the N-word and gave us one final opportunity for a confession. When no one responded, he forced the team to run two miles around the track. Ninnettu transferred to Freedom High School, leaving behind an all-white football team, which opened the door for a slough of racial insults every time we faced a primarily black team. I hated my football team but I was a part of it. By association, I was a part of the racism too, whether I liked it or not. My silence was my racism. I quit the team before the end of my junior year.

Consequently, my experience in the Africana Studies department at UNCA can be best categorized in phases of my understanding black people, in America and abroad. I was originally drawn to the department for African studies when I had the opportunity to travel to Kenya in the summer of 2005 as part of a study researching HIV/AIDS and it affects on children. In all honesty, my initial reason for going to Kenya was not to learn about HIV/AIDS in a hands-on atmosphere; it was for the exotic images that I, a

Westerner, associated with the continent Africa: the tribal land where elephants and zebras and lions and tigers roam in abundance.

What I experienced, of course, was much different. But now I find myself asking: what was at the root of my naiveté? Was it the pre-painted National Geographic Africa that I wanted, was experiencing blackness a part of the appeal –that I would force myself to be around people that white American pop-culture had deemed the "other"? I sought a new cultural experience—this much is sure, but to what end? As innocent a part as my conscious mind may play in negotiating the reasons for traveling to Africa, my unconscious motivation now seems illuminated by the startling truth expressed in Mr. White's letter: my American fear of race drove me to confront Africans with hopes of reconciling my whiteness with their blackness; to a place where history was less immediate and personal, where an ocean swayed between me and my nation's hypocrisy.

**Site Information and First Impressions**

Last semester's Field Practicum served as my first experience accessing an African American community. My field sites were at Hall Fletcher Elementary School and the Americorp Homework Club at the Pisgah View Apartments. At both locations, I was able to tutor one-on-one with children from in and around the West Asheville area and, in doing so, was able to meet with teachers, parents, social workers and other volunteers to gather an idea of how socio-economic status and race-related issues affected children's early educational development.

Hall Fletcher is located in the southern corner of West Asheville, a five-minute walk from Pisgah View, Asheville's largest project housing area. Of the 50 member staff

at Hall Fletcher, there are fifteen black employees, which include the principal, five teachers, three assistants, a social worker, two janitors, and three cafeteria workers. There are two Hispanic teachers, and one teacher of Asian background. Astoundingly, ninety-two percent of the 297 enrolled students come from families listed below the poverty line. Seventy three percent of the children are minority individuals[2].

The school was recently awarded the FutureReady "small school prize," which granted them $250,000 in hardware, software, and technological services from Dell, Microsoft and Intel. Hall Fletcher is one of only three schools in the nation to win a FutureReady grant. Walking into the school, I was amazed by their technological superiority. With a "Smart-Board" (touch sensitive, chalkboard-sized IMac) in every classroom and upgraded computer labs equipped with a number of educational software programs. It is hard to believe, at first sight, that any of the children live under the poverty line. It seems glaringly ironic that at school they are surrounded by educational tools that their parents, at home, will never be able to afford. Justin Hall, a first grade teacher, said in an interview, "Having this new technology has changed the way we teach. We all go through an adjustment. What's sad is that as much money that's poured into our school recently, a lot of these kids still depend on the free lunch as their only *complete* meal of the day."

Mr. Hall's comments and assumptions not only reveal poignant truths about the poverty-stricken households that many of the students come from but also relate something of his background in approaching education. Though all student/teacher relationships maintain an established level of distance due to their ascribed roles, at Hall Fletcher, there is a dissonance between students and teachers along cultural lines that is

[2] www.great**schools**.net/modperl/browse_**school**/nc/244

compounded by the high-level poverty rates. That is not to suggest that the teachers are themselves rich, but that there is a dearth of understanding that exists between socio-economic classes and educational affability. If the teachers do not recognize the overwhelming number of challenges that face their students due to economic disadvantages, their relationship with their students, which is extremely important in the K-5 grades, may become stagnant.

Every Wednesday afternoon, from 2:30 to 6:00, I volunteered at the Pisgah View Apartment (PVA) Homework Club. The actual site of the Homework Club was apartment 32 E off of Granada street. Inside, there were signs strewn about the walls, reading: "If it's the truth it's not bragging: Tell us about your accomplishments," and "Values to uphold: Fairness, Responsibility, Citizenship, Trustworthiness, and Respectfulness." The club operated based upon points: one point for cleanliness, one point for behavior, and one point for work ethic. Soni and Sarah, both white, both Americop volunteers, were in charge of the club. Of the sixteen to twenty kids in the club, Soni normally helped the younger K-3 students while Sarah tended to the 4-6 graders. Most of the children were enrolled at Hall Fletcher Elementary. Some of them were from Isaac Dixon Elementary. All of children were African Americans, and they all struggled in school.

**Case Comparison: Cultural Adoption**

On my first day of volunteering, I timidly entered a 3rd grade classroom, aware my entrance could throw off the students' ability to concentrate, but to no avail because the classroom was already filled with the sound of fury. A red-faced teacher, Mr. Seijo,

stood at the head of the classroom screaming at a bulky Hispanic boy and a corn-rowed black boy who were merrily chasing a little black girl around the classroom. Once the children saw me, they stopped. The little girl returned to her seat and Mr. Seijo ceased the silence to get the children back on track.

He asked the students to work on creative writing stories and instructed Junior and Tatiana, two of the four Hispanic children in the class, to work with me on their spelling and sentence structure. When they did not budge from their seats, Mr. Seijo yelled at them in Spanish to do as they were told. A hush settled over the classroom, and they quickly approached my table. Rico, one of the African American students in the class, remarked, "Yo, did ya'll hear that? Mr. Seijo got all Mexican on 'em." Mr. Seijo turned his attention to Rico, smiled and said, "Yo Rico, if you and the rest of the class don't get your butts to work, ya'll ain't playin outside today. Got me?" Rico responded, "Yup," and the class settled down. In a matter of minutes Mr. Seijo had spoken in his natural dialect, his Spanish dialect, and an adopted "hip" dialect. His ability to channel dialects as they applied to students of different cultural backgrounds and in view of the entire class, quickly restored order on the whole.

Dialect adoption is one among a smorgasbord of tools used by the forward-thinking teachers at Hall Fletcher Elementary to relate to the students who, otherwise, see little of themselves in their educators. Witnessing Mr. Seijo's reaction attuned my traditional expectations of the elementary process of teaching racial and ethnic sensibility to a more rational approach: acknowledging racial and cultural differences and similarities like an umbrella that emphasizes positive core truths and shields from the negative realities.

When working with Soni and Sarah at the PVA Homework Club, I noticed time and again their different methods in connecting with the children. Sarah was the more static of the two. She spoke to every child in her natural dialect and had little recreational activity with the kids. While the kids, Soni, and I spent recreational time on the basketball courts, she made the snacks. Come snack-time, Sarah divvied up the food and served it to the kids, constantly reminding them to wash their hands before eating and share with one another. This was one of her forms of connecting with the children: playing the role of the provider.

Soni, on the other hand, attempted to connect with the children by playing with them during recreational time. I found that she often slipped into a "hip" or "street" dialect with the children during game play. "Don't ya'll even *think* about going double-dutch on me," she yelled one day while jumping rope. Another time, after Daqwan, one of the fifth graders blocked CJ's shot, a second grader, she said, "CJ, you got *smacked* down. Don't be goin into Day-day's (Daqwan's nickname) house, CJ." Shortly after, I asked Daqwan what he thought about the way Soni slipped into dialect. He said, "You mean when she talk black? Ah, I don't know. Sometimes it's all right, you know like when she's joking or something. But other times it's just annoying, like, makes us feel weird."

Dialect adoption in an educational atmosphere can debilitate credibility. In my experience, it can have a tendency to alienate students. On one hand, it is a tactic for building cross-cultural relationships; on the other hand, it forces the perpetuation of stereotypes and is minority specific in nature (i.e. an African American educator would not speak "white" to gain camaraderie with her white students). Soni deems herself a

middle-aged white "geek." For the kids, she is all too foreign to speak like them or their family and friends. At times it sounds patronizing and mocking. The context and timing must be right.

One rainy day Soni and I were guiding some of the K-3 students through their mathematics homework. They began to get restless because we couldn't go outside for recess. As one of the girls approached the ball closet, Soni said, "Na Ah, girlfriend, I didn't give you no permission to go in there. *Get* your butt outta that closet." Right then the phone rang, Soni picked it up and said, "PVA Homework Club, this is Soni speaking," in a proper tone. As soon as she hung up she yelled up the steps, "Sholanda, your mamma just called. Said you gotta be home by five." Lyric, one of the older girls, turned to me and said, "Man, Soni's wak. Listen to her, she's talking black then white then black." Soni's inconsistency doomed her. For the collective, she adopted the "hip" dialect, however, when Soni handled the children one-on-one, she never strayed from her general American dialect. She even corrected them on their grammar.

Though Soni made an honest effort to connect with these children who are of a different socio-economic class and cultural background as hers, her methods of doing so compromised her authority and intent. She delegated points for the merit system and was the figurehead of authority in the club, she was the most vulnerable to become villianized by the students. I asked a second grader, Chandelier, what she thought of Soni and she said, "I don't *like* her." "Why," I responded. "Because she's weird. And she's mean. I like it when Sarah helps me." "You don't like it when I help you?" "No." "Why not?" "Because you're a boy! Duh!" There are some things we cannot control, like gender and color. Soni and Sarah fought a constant battle for acceptance and trust amongst their

students; while Soni attempted to connect by demonstrating similarities and making the children feel comfortable with themselves and their culture, Sarah connected with the students by her shear consistency. She talked as she talked, was not exclusive, treated everyone the same, punished everyone the same, and perhaps most importantly, provided the afternoon snack every day.

Mr. Seijo and Soni face a multitude of distinctly different challenges as educators. Mr. Seijo was in an official classroom, which implied official rules and regulations to student behavior. The kids knew he had a boss who had a boss who had a boss… He worked within a more complex institutional system than Soni. This means he was not the last stop. If a student disrupted the class, he could send the student to the principal's office. He also had a multi-"racial" or multi-cultural classroom of students. This allowed him to act within a number of different cultural personas while maintaining a certain authoritative relativism about his methods. He accessed cultural realities tactfully, not always relying on dialects, which can alienate students, but also utilizing other methods such as music (he kept a guitar and African drums in his classroom), a variety of multi-cultural books, and connecting with the students and parents on a personal level.

Soni had no such luxury. She ran a simple institutional system where the students participated voluntarily and knew her as the central authority. Her conditional minority status among the African American students provided the children with a certain fixed power, as she was foreign to their culture and living area. While she was based within a simple institutional system, she operated within a complex social system. There is a certain homogeneity of standardized schooling that, despite some deviation, fixes student behavior. With Soni it was impossible to create such an atmosphere because the

Homework Club operated within the PVA social/cultural system. There were countless, immediate, exterior influences that pressured club activity and Soni's authority every day. Any attempt she made to cross cultural lines and establish a mutual respect and significance was a positive thrust, but she risked alienating herself and her students when she walked the tightrope of cultural and dialectic adoption.

**Conclusion**

The Field Practicum course engrained in me an awareness of the broad variety of challenges that children endure and return to after an eight hour day at school. The problems start at home or with the parents, as I saw with many of the PVA kids: drunken, ornery parents showing up an hour late for their kids; cracked out fathers, practically twitching when they come to pick up their sons; angry, overworked mothers blaming Soni, Sarah, and I for their kid's bad grades – the gambit runs on and on. But most of the families I met, whether in passing as the children were being picked up, in personal conferences, or at Hall Fletcher Elementary, were upstanding, decent, dignified people simply stuck in an area or at a job where it is impossible to move up and make things better for themselves.

Asheville is not the quaint, idyllic mountain town that it is painted as; it is a city where social injustices abound, where the African American population is hidden behind hospitals, crammed into project housing hubs at the outskirts of neighborhoods, and disenfranchised daily. But it is also a city that strives to be aware of its own position. There are always avenues of change, opportunities for renewal on a practical, every day basis and in the grander scheme of things. For instance, when I started at PVA, Soni

asked me to familiarize myself with some of the older fourth and fifth grade boys, as they were her most apathetic students. I introduced myself to Daqwan, the ringleader of the boys, and he actually looked at the other guys and said, "Can you believe this white boy?" Then he turned and walked away. I was astounded.

For the first couple of weeks, I tried my best to see eye-to-eye with the older guys, to inspire them to want to do their homework. I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Of the four of them, two of the boys, Rashaad and Deeqwan, said they wanted to be rap stars, Daqwan wanted to be a pro basketball player and Kevin wanted to be a pro football player. After weeks of trying to connect with the boys, I decided to bring my basketball shoes to the homework club and in recess I joined the guys out on the court. Before, I had shot around but never played a game with the guys. When Daqwan saw me lacing up, he was ecstatic. We played for almost an hour (he was very good for a fifth grader).

Thereafter, I never had a single problem with the boys. They asked for my help on their problems and even invited me to their school basketball game. Acceptance was not what was important for me: it was surging through their defense mechanisms and breaking down the structures that made me white and them black. But we are what we are and no matter how hard we strive to understand one another, history will not allow transparency. That is why educators must walk such tight lines in getting through to their students. By whatever means, cultural adoption falls short of displaying respect and inclusion from teachers to students. Volunteering over seventy hours of time between the two sites last semester was an unequivocal learning experience that provided me a glimpse into the nature of extreme poverty and project housing as it affects the education

of young people. More importantly, my experience presented me role-models in the teachers and volunteers and students that have to work so much harder than others to stay ahead, to make an impact, and to provide hope to the hopeless.