School Reform Efforts for Low-Income African American Students Must Build on Knowledge about the Dynamics of Classroom Life

THE SCALING UP OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES, BY DEFINITION, REQUIRES THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THESE PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS, BUT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REFORM HAS NEVER BEEN A STRONG POINT OF RESEARCHERS, POLICY MAKERS, OR PRACTITIONERS. AGAIN AND AGAIN, REFORMS FAIL TO OCCUR, OCCUR ONLY IN DRASTICALLY REDUCED OR PERVERTED FORM, OR OCCUR BUT THEN EXPIRE OVER TIME AS THEY MEET HEAD-ON WITH THE REALITIES OF CURRENT SCHOOL CONTEXTS, PRACTICES, AND STRUCTURES.

One way to improve the track record for implementation of reform in schools that serve low-income African American children placed at risk of academic failure is through developing a descriptive, in-depth knowledge base on the dynamics of classroom life in these schools. We need to know what is happening with these children in their schools and classrooms, and obtain information on how it is happening and why it is happening. From such a knowledge base, we can anticipate the real-life obstacles to reform and develop ways to overcome those obstacles; we can provide guidance for developing specific school reforms that will benefit low-income African American children; we can help to better target and more successfully conduct professional development activities, and we can develop components and procedures that will make our currently effective programs and practices not only more effective but also more easily implemented.

Through intensive direct classroom observation and focus group interviews in six elementary schools in low-income African American communities in an urban area, Howard University CRESPAR researchers A. Wade Boykin, Constance Ellison, Donna Penn Towns, and Almeta Stokes and their graduate students are identifying and describing the classroom life of children in five categories:

Social/psychological — what social and psychological characteristics do the children and their teachers typically display?

Technical core of instruction — what is the technical core of instruction upon which student achievement is based (what is being taught and how)?

Structure of the learning environment — how are classrooms physically organized and what are the structures of daily classroom life?

Discipline and classroom management — what are the typical forms of discipline, incentives, and feedback that teachers employ?

Perception of the learning environment — what are the various perceptions of classroom life held by teachers and students?

Data gathered from both the classroom observations and the focus group interviews are being linked to each of these categories and to socio-linguistic and cultural themes. Socio-linguistic themes reveal the essential role that communication plays in the teaching/learning process and relate not only to what is being said, but how it is being said, who is saying it, and to whom. Emerging themes in these classrooms involve code-switching between vernacular and standard speech and the use of affective language. Cultural themes relate to how

observed behaviors and expressions reflect ten cultural dimensions — movement, verve, affect, orality, communalism, individualism, competition, object orientation, cognition or affect, and bureaucracy orientation.

In brief, the classroom cultural ecology research team is compiling and analyzing extensive data on the daily routines and activities that transpire in classrooms serving African American children from low-income backgrounds. Its purpose is to provide as complete a description as possible of the dynamics of classroom life for poor African American children in urban schools.

What Is Happening in These Classrooms?

A multitude of preliminary findings are emerging from analyses of the observational and focus group data. Examining the observational data, the CRESPAR researchers have begun enumerating sets of multiple findings on each of the five dimensions. A small sample of the findings includes:

In the social/psychological category ▪ Personality and demeanor of the teacher is a major factor in setting the tone for the classroom on any given day. ▪ Teachers place substantial emphasis on time and time management. ▪ Teachers try to maintain a "cult of quietness" in the classroom. Students resist this and are constantly being told to be quiet.

In the technical core of instruction category ▪ Teachers use a great deal of group instructional activities, during which there seem to be fewer disciplinary problems than during individual learning activities. ▪ Instructional feedback to students is generally positive and occurs on a regular basis. ▪ Teachers typically make the assumption that all students are on the same instructional level.

In the structure of the learning environment category ▪ There are a host of classroom routines and rituals that students must be familiar with and obey or they are disciplined. ▪ There are constant interruptions from outside of the classroom.

In the discipline and classroom management category ▪ Teachers who set pleasant tones for the day tended to use indirect and cooperative forms of commands, while those who did not tended to give orders in a more direct and authoritarian way. ▪ Teachers use non-verbal modes of disciplining and managing in the classroom including turning lights off and on, standing in silence until students are quiet, taking time out, and having students put their heads on their desks.

In the perceptions of the learning environment category ▪ Some teachers exhibit expectations of success for their students through using such expressions as "my beautiful and intelligent African American students." ▪ Teachers expect students to obey classroom rules and to respect and obey the teacher and other designated students.

What the Students Say

Focus group discussions included 37 low-income African American elementary school children in grades one through six. Discussions were based on the five conceptual categories described above.

In the focus group discussions, held separately with students in grades 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6, the children provided extensive detail about their life in the classroom. They discussed engagement in group work, the need to follow rules and regulations and what would happen when they didn't, their relationships with one another and with the teacher, their teacher's use of praise and other rewards — in short, multiple facets of the five conceptual categories. The researchers found that these children, who had been selected by their schools to participate in the focus groups, consistently perceived their environment as a positive one, and felt that their teachers wanted to help them learn and succeed in the classroom.

Building the Knowledge Base

The CRESPAR researchers note that they have made "an initial step toward the development of a holistic conceptual approach to viewing the ecology of classrooms." In other words, they have begun the development of a full-scale description of the actual experiences that low-income African American children are having in their classrooms. They are delineating the existing routines, practices, and structures that these students live with each day, and documenting the attitudes and perceptions of not only the students but also their teachers. They are building the knowledge base from which more effective programs can be launched and from which more effective implementation can be accomplished.   ■