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ABSTRACT

Interviews conducted with 45 public school teachers in a county school system in rural southern Appalachia explored teacher perceptions of cultural differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students and whether teachers born and reared in Appalachia differed in their perceptions from teachers born and reared outside the region. Teachers came from four elementary schools and one high school in a predominately rural county approximately two-thirds of whose inhabitants were fourth generation Appalachia residents. The study found that views of Appalachian teachers differed little from their non-Appalachian counterparts, although they were more reluctant and uncomfortable in citing differences between students and occasionally viewed Appalachian students in a more positive way. A majority of both groups of teachers perceived differences between students based on symbolic and structural dimensions rather than cultural ones. Over 80 percent stated that students were treated differently by the school system depending on their group identity, but did not believe they themselves treated student differently. Comments of both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers were more flattering to town students. The paper concludes that Appalachian teachers do not offer an alternative to the stereotyping and prejudice that Appalachian students experience in the schools. Thirty-one references are appended. (LFL)

Teachers' Perceptions of Appalachian and Non-Appalachian Students

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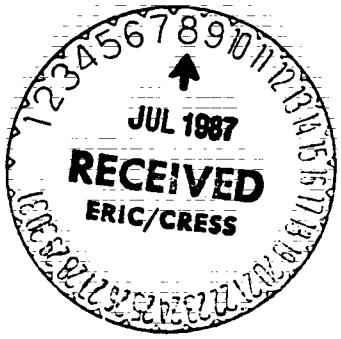

OBJECTIVES

This paper is based on interviews with 45 public school teachers in a county school system in rural southern Appalachia. The purpose of the interviews was to illicit information concerning teachers' perceptions of cultural differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students. Of particular interest was whether teachers from Appalachia differed in their perceptions from teachers who were born and reared outside of the region. This particular research was part of a broader study funded by the National Science Foundation which investigated the relationship of Appalachian ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and rural/urban residence to educational experiences, decisions and attitudes. As part of this broader study, teachers' perceptions constitute one dimension of the educational setting which might have an effect on the educational experience of rural Appalachian students. The interviews are interpreted within the context of this broader study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By most standards of educational success, such as dropout rate, percentage of students going to college, and achievement

scores, education in Appalachia does not measure up to education in the rest of the nation (Appalachian Consortium 1981; Graff 1962; Parker 1970; Schrag 1972). Yet, research into the possible causes of these "failures" has been relatively scarce. Many non-research based commentaries on education in Appalachia have suggested explanations which are highly similar to thoses found for low educational success among more visible ethnic groups in the United States -- poverty, culture conflict, cultural incongruency, and prejudice (Branscome 1972; Browning 1978; Clark 1974; Ikenberry 1970; Miller 1977; Ogletree 1978). However, there is little solid research available to either substantiate or refute these observations. Part of the reason for this relative paucity of research in Appalachia is due to the conflict, even among Appalachian scholars, over the question of Appalachian ethnicity and culture. Some scholars have argued that Appalachia does not constitute a separate culture area and that people from the region do not possess a distinct ethnic identity (Billings 1974; Fisher 1978; Stephenson and Greer 1981). Others have argued that the Appalachian region does possess a distinctive culture and that people from the region do possess an ethnic identity (Best 1970; Clark 1974; DeYoung and Porter 1979; Friedl 1978; Jones 1971; Whisnant 1980). This disagreement, combined with the fact that Appalachians are descended largely from Scotch-Irish protestants, has prevented many researchers from investigating factors such as culture conflict, cultural incongruency, and ethnic prejudice as they might relate to educational "failure."

One factor that has been investigated in non-Appalachian educational research is that of teachers' perceptions of student differences and the impact that such perceptions have on the educational experience of students. At least since the research of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), the impact of teachers' perceptions on the educational experience of their students has been recognized as of some significance. Ethnographic investigations of the school experience of minority group students have found teachers'perceptions and cultural prejudices to be negative factors in those students' school experience (Grindal 1972; Hostetler and Huntington 1971; Modiano 1973; Rosenfield 1971). More specifically, Ogbu (1978) has found that teachers' perceptions of students reflect the patterns of social dominance in a society.

In Appalachia, several researchers have pointed to teachers' perceptions as one factor which contributes to the negative school experience of many Appalachian students. Teachers' perceptions that rural Appalachian students are more likely to dropout, more likely to be poorly dressed and groomed, more withdrawn, backward and stubborn than non-Appalachian students have been documented (Hicks 1976; Kaplan 1971; Looff 1971; Mink and Barker 1968; Stephenson 1968). However, this previous research has not investigated these perceptions within the framework of culture and ethnicity. Prior research by two of the authors of this paper found that rural Appalachian students did perceive ethnic prejudice and stereotyping on the part of teachers in the county in which data for this paper were

collected (Reck and Reck (1980). Since the broader research conducted by the authors of this paper had indicated that there were cultural, structural, and symbolic dimensions to rural Appalachian ethnicity (Keefe, Reck and Reck 1983), an investigation of teacher perceptions was undertaken as part of the research into the symbolic dimension of ethnicity and its relationship to the school experience.

Depres (1975) identifies two general approaches to the concept of ethnicity: the objective, in which ethnic groups are distinguished from other groups on the basis of identifiable cultural traits (language, religion, family structure, etc.) or national origin; and the subjective, in which self-identification and perceived differences bound different groups. This model has been further refined to include the structural, cultural and symbolic dimensions of ethnicity (Keefe, Reck and Reck 1983). The structural dimension refers to the ethnic boundaries created from opposition and conflict between groups which are conceptualized in ethnic terms. The cultural dimension points toward ethnic boundaries created from actual differences in cultural patterns of groups within a single social or national system. Lastly, the symbolic dimension places emphasis on ethnic identity, a shared feeling of peoplehood, or perceived cultural differences which may be used to dinstinguish one group from another. Thus, teachers' perceptions of ethnic differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students would constitute one part of symbolic ethnicity.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCE

Research was conducted in a county school system comprised of a single consolidated high school and eight K-8 elementary schools. Approximately 5000 students are served by the system; the high school has approximately 1400 students. There are about 170 teachers in the system. The county is predominantly rural with 38 percent of the population living in the county seat which has a population of only 12,000. One additional incorporated town in the county has a population of 1200, while the other 60 percent of the population live in the countryside. Approximately two-thirds of the residents of the county are descended from families who have resided in the Appalachian mountains for three generations or more. A considerable tourist and retirement industry, along with a mid-sized university, have brought most of the non-Appalachians to the area.

Teachers to be interviewed were selected from four elementary schools -- three rural and one located in the county seat -- and the high school. The twenty-one elementary school teachers interviewed were selected so that early grade experience (K-2), late grade experience (6-8), and special teachers (gifted, reading, special education) would be represented. The twenty-five high school teachers interviewed were selected to provide a spread across course subject matter and levels. Fifty-eight percent of the teachers interviewed were born and reared in Appalachia.

The Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers were similar in terms of such factors as religious background (Protestant),

education (M.A. degree), spouses' education (college) and occupation (professional or managerial), and gender (elementary teachers are almost all female while high school teachers are 50/50 male/female). However, the two populations also differed in certain significant ways. The non-Appalachian teachers were all at least second-generation college graduates while the Appalachian teachers came from families in which their fathers averaged nine years of schooling and were most often employed in blue-collar and farming occupations. The non-Appalachian teachers almost all live in the town limits of the single town in the county, while the Appalachian teachers are much more likely to reside in rural areas of the county. This is true regardless of the location of the school at which they teach. Non-Appalachian teachers had lived in the county for an average of thirteen years while almost all of the Appalachian teachers had lived in the county all or most of their lives.

The interview schedule consisted of 17 items (some with sub-items) designed to illicit perceptions of differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students and 10 background items designed to establish standard information about the teacher, most importantly about the teacher's ethnic background, defined operationally in terms of a minimum three-generational family depth in Appalachia. Most of the interviews were conducted by the researchers with several conducted by graduate assistants.

RESULTS

The first series of questions illicited teachers' perceptions of major issues facing the local school system. Several issues, including consolidation into a single high school (accomplished in 1965), a school bond referendum, and lengthier school days and year, were the topic of considerable public discussion at the time of the interviews. Both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers overwhelmingly supported the school bond and disapproved of lengthier school hours and years. Their main reason for opposing lengthier school days and year was that "more time would not create better education." Both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers agreed that this was the case. While both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers overwhelmingly supported the referendum, their major explanation for its failure in the public vote revealed an interesting difference. The most common explanation among the non- Appalachian teachers was that "the issues were not understood by the public," while the most frequent explanation given by the Appalachian teachers was that "it lacked public support." While the difference between these explanations may seem minor, they do reflect a different attitude toward "the public" and a different degree of identification with that public which is important in understanding ethnic boundaries. More will be said about this in the next section of the paper.

With regard to the question of consolidation, 35 percent of the Appalachian teachers stated that the county needed a second

high school while only 21 percent of the non-Appalachian teachers felt that another high school was needed. Although consolidation of five high schools into the present one was finalized in 1965, the issue is still a controversial one among local people. The high school is located in the county seat which has a population of 60 percent non-Appalachians and a majority of middle-class families. Many Appalachian people in the county feel that the high school is physically located and academically structured to serve town people who are predominantly outsiders of middle or upper-class background. Despite their different vantage point, as teachers, with regard to education, the Appalachian teachers agree much more with their non-teaching counterparts concerning this issue.

A second set of questions illicited responses concerning perceptions of differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students. The questions covered perceptions of differences in behavior, dress, language, family life, religion, school participation, academic abilities, and socialization in school. Although the vast majority of both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers perceived that there were significant differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian students, more Appalachian teachers perceived no differences: 29 percent of the Appalacnian teachers perceived no differences, while only 13 percent of the non-Appalachian teachers saw no differences. This pattern remained the same for questions on specific differences: although differences were perceived by the majority of both teacher groups, a greater number of non-Appalachian

teachers perceived differences. For example, all of the non-Appalachian teachers perceived at least some differences with regard to dress, speech, and family life, while there was always from 10 - 30 percent of the Appalachian teachers who perceived no differences.

While the most common explicit classification scheme used by the teachers was a rural/town dichotomy, this distinction often blurred into ethnic distinctions between Appalachian and non-Appalachian. For example, when one non-Appalachian teacher was asked "what kinds of general groups of students are there at the high school," he initially responded in terms of the rural vs. town dichotomy, throwing in minor categories such as "jocks" and the "artsy crowd." But when he was asked questions about specific differences in behavior between the groups he had identified, he then started to collapse his categories into "mountain kids/rednecks" and "outsiders." The distinctions between these groups were, moreover, drawn in basic ethnic terms: mountain kids/rednecks "...wear cat-hats and have a pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco...;" "they are more comfortable in the fields...(than at school);" "...have no manners...;" "...wear blue jeans, a flannel shirt, a cat-hat...drive a pickup truck..." This sort of response was standard. Thus, while initial distinctions used the terms "rural" and "town", they more frequently evolved into ethnic distinctions between Appalachians and non-Appalachians.

Both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers made the same basic distinctions. Non-Appalachian teachers were slightly more

likely to volunteer the distinction between rural and town students (47% vs. 38%), to volunteer the category "redneck" (37% vs. 19%), and to agree when asked whether rural and town students form identifiably separate groups (81% to 73%). There were no patterned differences between the responses of elementary and high school teachers.

A third set of questions explored perceptions of whether or not Appalachian and non-Appalachian students were treated differently in the schools by teachers, other students, and counselors. Over 80 percent of the teachers stated that students were treated differently depending on their group identity. While teachers seemed to recognize the prejudices of the system, they were much less likely to include themselves as a part of that system which treated students differently based on their group identity: slightly more than half of the teachers stated that teachers do not treat students differently based on group identity.

This statement about themselves as teachers contradicted other statements made during the course of the interviews. Both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers' comments were more likely to flatter town students than rural students. For example:

"Town kids are more confident and do better academically."

"Town kids have good grammar and descriptive language."

"Town kids have more social skills, are more confident, are more involved in school activities, and do better academically."

"Town kids are more trained to have manners."

"Rural kids are more inhibited, uncomfortable in new situations."

"Rural kids have bad grammar and slower, slurred speech."

Evidently, teachers view these kinds of statements as reflecting reality rather than prejudices. Some of them did point out what they considered to be exceptions to these general distinctions. For example, one teacher who was discussing the "redneck" group pointed to one of his current students to illustrate that there are exceptions to the generally negative attributes of that group. This student, a member of the National Honor Society, was going to be the first member of his family to attend college. When asked why he referred to this obviously academically gifted student as a "redneck," he replied "He comes off the back of a mountain. He wears blue jeans, a flannel shirt, a cat-hat. His daddy drives a pickup truck." Thus, the student was not viewed for what he was: a bright student who lived out in the county; but he was viewed from the perspective of an ethnic category consisting of negative qualities: a bright "redneck" from "off the back of a mountain."

Contrary to the responses on the second set of questions, there were no systematic differences in responses between the Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers. However, there were differences between the responses of the elementary and high school teachers, with high school teachers perceiving differences much more frequently. For example, although 53 percent of the teachers felt that they did not treat students

differently based upon their ethnic background, 67 percent of the high school teachers felt that they did, while only 17 percent of the elementary school teachers agreed. The same pattern was present in other areas.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

The data from the teacher interviews are consistent with the ethnographic data collected in the county. Contemporary Appalachian ethnicity was found to be constituted primarily of symbolic and structural dimensions rather than cultural ones. While some cultural differences were found to exist between Appalachian natives and non-natives (e.g. family relationships, social networks, and certain values such as identification with the mountains), most differences were found to be SES-based. Yet, these differences were conceptualized by teachers, as well as by students and parents, as ethnic in nature. Thus, Appalachian ethnicity is constructed symbolically and functions structurally through perceived opposition to an equally symbolically constructed non-Appalachian group.

Moreover, these ethnic categories were constructed by both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers. Appalachian teachers typically did not identify overtly with the rural, Appalachian group that they perceived. Despite their shared origin - the mountains - they distanced themselves from that group. In fact, only one Appalachian teacher volunteered a positive identity with Appalachia. This distancing by middle-class Appalachian teachers is characteristic of other middle-class Appalachians as

well. Middle-class status provides Appalachian people with the means and the inclination to negotiate themselves out of a largely forced, negative identity. In a symbolically constructed social system which tends toward the blurring of SES differences, residence differences, and personal differences through the use of a derogatory ethnic gloss -- redneck, the only certain way to avoid that category is to distance oneself in terms of social identity. Unfortunately, what this leads to is an acceptance of the negative stereotypes of the larger social system.

There is some indication that Appalachian teachers experience some ambivalence with their social circumstance. They were more frequently reluctant and uncomfortable in citing differences between students. Occassionally, they viewed Appalachian children in more positive terms than non-Appalachian children. Their explanation for the failure of the school bond referendum indicated greater sympathy and identity with rural, Appalachian people. The vote on that issue, like most political issues, divided along the lines of the rural, Appalachian vote against and the town, non-Appalachian vote "for." The non-Appalachian teachers explained this vote in terms of "the public" (read Appalachian natives) not understanding the issues, definitely a deficiency on the part of "the public" (read Appalachian native). On the other hand, the Appalachian teachers explained the failure in terms of the more neutral statement of the bond simply not having popular support. Implicit in what many of them said concerning this issue was a

recognition of the schism between Appalachian and non-Appalachian and the difficulties that this schism can produce.

Despite these differences, Appalachian teachers do not appear to offer a real alternative to the stereotyping and prejudice that Appalachian students experience in the schools. Their views differ little from their non-Appalachian counterparts. This is to be expected since they are part of the larger social system of which the school is one component. Despite the idealistic notion that schooling is designed to transform students and society, the reality is that schooling more often performs the function of transmitting the social system by reflecting and reinforcing that system. In this case, teacher perceptions and their relationship to the symbolic construction of an ethnic system which, as one Appalachian teacher perceptively observed, is "...like racism except these aren't Blacks."

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