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The Big Picture - Pinckney Elementary School

by Anne E. Barker



Shante and I having lunch in the
"Jungle Book Cafe"
a.k.a. the Pinckney Elementary
Cafeteria

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I chose to complete my service learning project at Pinckney Elementary School. I was assigned to be a lunch buddy for a fifth grade girl named Shante. I was at the school from eleven thirty until one on both Tuesdays and Thursdays. Shante and I spent our time having lunch, going to recess, and finishing up her homework during study hall. I really enjoyed getting to know Shante and her friends and was able to make some interesting observations about many of the issues we discussed in class involving gender, race, and class distinctions.



Shante's model
pose on the
slide at recess.

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Observations & Results

After observing the children on the playground for many weeks I began to realize that many of the students have a problem being tolerant of other students. I believe that much of this comes from the stereotypes they place on one another and themselves. Pinckney is a very diverse school full of children from different racial and class backgrounds. The children assume they know something about their peers just by looking at them. It became apparent to me that if somehow the stereotypes could be removed the children would begin to understand one another more and become more tolerant.



This observation made me think of the article we discussed in class by Bartky. Bartky argues that stereotyping is a key form of oppression that leads to psychological oppression, internalization, and fragmentation. In her article she says the oppressed people are unable to achieve autonomy and are unable to adhere to their own beliefs. I think that this is especially difficult for children because they are still growing into who they are going to be. If they are stereotyped at such a young age they may begin to internalize whatever that stereotype may be and grow up into a self-fulfilling prophesy. If an intelligent child is always told that they are stupid they will begin to believe it and will grow without the confidence and autonomy necessary to be a complete human being, and they will grow into the role of a stupid person. Children are so vulnerable to stereotyping. It is very important that we educate them on what stereotypes are, why they are bad and usually false, and what we can do to change their prevalence in our society.

I decided to do a tolerance presentation about stereotypes for the fifth grade class. I began by explaining what a stereotype is using examples and pictures. I held up pictures and asked them to tell me what stereotype might be applied to that person and why. I then told them why it was not true. As an activity I had the children think about a stereotype that someone might apply to them and write a paragraph about what it is and why it is not true. Then I had the children pair up in the class with someone they do not know very well and talk about what they wrote. It proved to be an interesting exercise that the children enjoyed very much.

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Volunteering at Pinckney brought several observations about children in our society today to light. For example, they are growing up far more quickly than they used to be and are fully aware of the social, racial, and gender issues that surround them. I also learned that Frye's metaphor of the birdcage is completely correct. While I chose to focus on one bar of the cage, stereotyping, there are many, many more forms of oppression and they are all interconnected. Dissecting one small section can only go so far, in order to end oppression entirely we are going to have to look at the big picture.

