SUPPORTING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE CLASSROOMS OF NEW URBAN TEACHERS THROUGH REFLECTION, RESEARCH, AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

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Abstract:
This article is a collaboration between a first year Teach for America corps member and his instructor for the course 'Child and Adolescent Development.' It is an account of the experiences of both the instructor and the new teacher as they grapple with some of the issues that face urban teacher education programs. The piece suggests that teacher education programs should encourage new urban teachers to take the perspective of their students through critical self-reflection and practitioner research. The authors describe some examples of how these tools can be used by new urban teachers both to better understand the challenges that face children in urban settings and to facilitate the construction of their emerging professional identities. Our experience suggests that by actively seeking to take the perspective of their students, teachers - especially new urban teachers whose cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds are different from their students - will be more likely to create classroom cultures with a social justice orientation.

Introduction

This article is the result of a reflective collaboration between a first year Teach for America (TFA) teacher, Ayan Chatterjee, and his Child and Adolescent Development Instructor at The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (GSE), Chris Soto. Ayan's final research project for the class - an analysis of how differences between his race and that of his students may have impacted teacher-student relationships during his first year teaching - provided both the frame and the inspiration for the piece. His experiences illustrate the benefits to new urban teachers of course assignments that facilitate perspective-taking through critical self-reflection and practitioner research projects.

Ayan includes some content from his course paper, but our primary emphasis is on the reflective processes that produced the assignment and the lessons we learned from its completion. For Chris and his co-instructors, the process involved choosing readings and assignments that could bridge the gap between theory and practice for new urban teachers. For Ayan and his cohort, the process - which continued well after the course was finished - involved actively seeking to improve teaching practices through critical self-reflection and a practitioner research project. The common goal was to use the course to 'ground' the notion of social justice in lived classroom experiences.

In support of social justice in the classroom, we both strongly believe that it is the responsibility of teacher education programs to facilitate both critical self-reflection and context-specific practitioner research in the induction stage of teacher development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Our experiences suggest that developmental theory can be both a topic of inquiry and a method for improving the perspective-taking capacity of new urban teachers. By emphasizing perspective-taking through reflection, new teachers can become aware of their biases. By engaging in teacher research in the classroom, they can more concretely visualize the impact of developmental theory in the context of the classroom and strategize alternate routes to equity through curriculum and practice. In our experience, the early use of these tools can precipitate the conscious construction of effective professional identities.

We use the plural 'identities' purposefully. Teachers will certainly pass through multiple professional identities across time as they move from the induction phase towards experimentation and mastery (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). They also, however, need to acquire diverse skill sets and develop multiple ways of being within their own classroom from moment to moment. This is especially true when the race, culture, or ethnicity of the teacher does not match that of his or her students, as is often the case in urban settings.

Put simply, urban teachers require an understanding of urban culture in order to be effective. Oakes, Franke, Quartz, and Rogers (2002) emphasize that the competence of urban teachers, in particular, cannot be separated into teacher skills and social action. As Ayan's experiences suggest, new teachers will succeed in urban settings to the degree that they effectively integrate conventional skills (i.e. content knowledge and classroom management savvy) with contextualized knowledge and an action orientation.

This places a heavy burden on urban teacher education programs. Instructors who construct syllabi and facilitate teacher

education courses must structure critical self-reflection but avoid 'navel-gazing' (Boler, 1999), provide relevant content while emphasizing context, and combine rich intellectual theory with practical applicability. Weiner (2002) suggests another difficulty - that there is a disconnect between instructors of urban-focused teacher education programs and useful urban education research. In his section, below, Chris gives an account of that disconnect through his experience as an instructor and focuses on some of his team's grounded rationale for including critical self-reflection and a practitioner research in the syllabus.

As we began to put our localized experiences down 'on paper,' we found theoretical support from sources that helped us frame our grounded ideas about urban teacher education. The most influential of these was a work by Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1999) that outlines the three prevailing conceptualizations of the relationship between teacher knowledge and teacher practice. The authors describe these three positions as *knowledge-for-practice*, *knowledge-in-practice*, and *knowledge-for-practice*. Proponents of the first position, *knowledge-of-practice*, assert that the best teaching practices grow out of university-based research and theory. The teacher becomes 'better' by knowing and incorporating evidence-based research into practice. In contrast, the *knowledge-in-practice* approach assumes that teachers learn best from observing and interacting with master teachers who are exemplars of good teaching - i.e. teachers benefit most from seeing good teaching in practice. Both conceptions regard the new teacher as a vessel to be filled with information that will improve his or her practice. The essential knowledge in the former position resides in the academy, while the essential knowledge in the latter position resides in the 'master' teacher.

Generally speaking, Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1999) find these two dualistic conceptions problematic because they draw a line between *theory* and *practice* and between the *knowledge* and the *knower*. They present a third conception, *knowledge-of-practice*, as a non-dualistic alternative. Here, the body of knowledge from which a teacher draws his or her effectiveness does not come from external sources. Instead, the teacher constructs knowledge in the context of his or her own work. Rather than viewing teachers as repositories of information, it empowers them to be proactive about studying their classrooms and reflecting on their practice, creating knowledge of their own contexts from within. It encourages them not only to *know*, but to *own* their practice. This approach closely resembles Ayan's experiences as a consumer and producer of knowledge through his teacher education program.

Chris

As a first time instructor of first time teachers, I was concerned about translating Child and Adolescent Development theory into a form that would be relatively easy to digest and useful in practice. Although I was quite familiar with the theoretical literature from my own graduate study and my time as a counselor for troubled teens, I had limited experience in urban schools and only a rudimentary understanding of teacher education literature. I was certain that linking the general developmental content to the highly specific urban context would be challenging.

In my experience, human development has a complex but undeniable relationship with classroom-based learning. The material is often intellectualized at the expense of its applicability because, despite its overwhelming presence in every facet of the classroom interaction, there are very few direct, precise, or strategic points of entry into pedagogical practice. I was nervous about making this material both accessible and relevant - especially when I recalled how often my eyes had found the back of my head during dry lectures on development in my own studies. I found, however, that this complexity also creates exciting opportunities for students to find and challenge their own belief systems as they begin to construct their emerging professional identities.

Prior to the beginning of the course, four other instructors and I assigned pertinent readings, and developed course assignments. From my perspective, three primary tensions surfaced in our discussions. The first, *flexibility - accountability,* refers to the tension between assigning difficult coursework that honored their full work schedule while not underestimating their ability to do difficult, growth-oriented work. The second, *processing self - processing content,* refers to the balance between allowing the new teachers to connect in class about their often difficult and emotional personal transitions to their new settings while, at the same time, covering relevant developmental material that would serve as a framework for improving their long-term pedagogical practice. The third, *theory - practice,* refers to translating the somewhat abstract course material relevant into lived classroom experiences.

Two basic assumptions served as a framework for our course assignments and helped our team manage these dualistic tensions. In retrospect, both of these assumptions reflected the *knowledge-of-practice* view of teacher education advocated by Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1999), described above. Although these assumptions were implicit at the time, I have come to regard them as fundamental to combining flexibility with accountability, processing self with processing content, and improving practice through theory.

The first assumption is that critical self-reflection is vital for new teachers, especially teachers in urban settings. Teaching, by definition, is a developmental act. Teachers create developmental contexts as much as they act within them. Messages that a child receives from his or her teachers impact all forms of a child's identity, including their learning, racial, and gender identities.

Like all applied developmentalists, teachers have an ethical mandate to reflect on their practice and explicate their biases in service to their students (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Because Child and Adolescent Development theory logically includes literature on the formation of schemas and cognitive biases, I believed that the course could serve as a convenient springboard to benign but productive explorations of teachers' own racial, ethnic, and gender biases. Assignments that brought personal history and developmental theory into the 'now' experiences of the urban classroom facilitated that examination of personal bias.

This type of critical self-reflection can also stimulate personal and professional identity development by providing a forum to tie a teachers past 'self' to their present and future 'self.' In Ayan's first class, for example, I asked the question 'how many of you still consider *yourselves* adolescents?' A high percentage of the TFA corps members acknowledged that, at least in some ways, they still did. In most cases, the new teachers cited their emerging 'professional identities' as one characteristic they identified with moving towards 'adulthood.'

Ideally, these opportunities to construct a professional identity narrative will occur across a life span. The opportunity to create a foundational narrative - one filled with canonical developmental literature and 'ah-ha' realizations about the way in which this literature can frame classroom practice - may only occur once, often in a teacher education program. New teachers need reflective opportunities built into their programs because the reality of the urban school teaching environment often prohibits it.

The second assumption is that teaching for social justice, first and foremost, is about perspective-taking in practice. Through content selection and assignment choices, our instructional team emphasized the perspective of the student. Reaching across race and class differences to teach minority urban children requires a high capacity for perspective-taking on the part of educators who are not minorities, themselves. A growing body of developmental literature emphasizes this point. Lerner (in Muss, 1999), for example, theorizes that incongruence between individuals and primary actors in their ecology like parents, friends, and teachers, can actually impair healthy development. Examples of this incongruence are often found in urban schools, where middle class white female teachers often teach predominantly minority children. Not surprisingly, Dee (2001) found that race does matter when it comes to teaching across differences. In his research, students who were assigned to an own-race teacher increased their scores in both math and reading by around four to five percentage points. This was true of both black and white students. As Ayan's reflection strongly suggests, minority students perceived to resist teacher authority are in an even more precarious position, because their behavior may be more heavily attributed to their race, ethnicity, or gender.

Teaching towards perspective-taking, then, is a vital component of social justice in the classroom. Our team of instructors tried to give assignments that would challenge the new teachers to recognize the perspective on the 'other side of their desk' (Weiner, 2002). Boler (1999), however, presses the issue of perspective-taking further and raises the danger of 'passive empathy' - our tendency to seek commonality across cultures without taking actions towards service. In part for that reason, we assigned a final project, highly reminiscent of the *knowledge-of-practice* view of teacher learning (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1999), which asked the students to do basic research on a developmental topic of their choosing in their own classroom. The project could be either quantitative or qualitative and use basic methods such as survey, observation, interview, or focus groups to dig more deeply into a particular developmental theory. In this way, the new teachers could do more than reflect on developmental issues in the classroom - they could observe, analyze, and strategize for the benefit of social justice in their own classrooms and hallways.

Ayan's final project emphasizes that the path to healthy development may be more challenging for children whose primary role models are racially or culturally dissimilar or unfamiliar. More importantly, his personal experiences managing difficult racial dynamics as a new science teacher in an urban classroom put some of the trials of novice teachers in relief. In doing so, it underscores the need for new teachers to acknowledge biases through reflection, de-construct familiar paradigms through practitioner research, and strategize about how to effectively make connections in cross-differencerelationships, in and out of the classroom.

Ayan

My assistant principal reminds me almost every day of Theodore Roosevelt's oft-quoted aphorism, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." In her conversations with new teachers, she invariably emphasizes the importance of building healthy relationships with students. As I approach the end of my first year in the classroom, it has become clear that following her guidance involves constant perspective-taking - not a skill that teachers can learn simply by sitting down and reading developmental theory. After all, university-stamped theories are only part of the picture. Ascertaining exactly what constitutes effective 'teacher knowledge' has been at the heart of my struggles.

As I try to untangle this complex discourse on teacher knowledge, I have begun to reflect on whether or not my TFA training has prepared me for the challenges of urban teaching. Many critics balk at the mere six weeks of pre-service training and two-year teaching commitment that TFA asks of its corps members. In this work I put aside the program's overall mission and broader

effectiveness, which are outside the scope of this article, and focus on my personal experiences and practitioner research; after all, I can only speak for myself. In my first year as a high school biology teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, the *knowledge-of-practice* approach that we described in our introduction has been the most meaningful in my development as a teacher (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1999). Most of my graduate courses, including Child and Adolescent Development, have adopted this stance, which has allowed me to develop my own professional identity as I integrate into the urban context.

The most influential of the practitioner research projects that I have completed so far - and one which now informs my practice on a daily basis - was a survey that I gave my students during my first semester in which they rated my performance as a teacher. This project was influential because it was based on the lived experiences of my students, with whom I had not yet developed strong relationships. At that point in the year, many of my students expressed intense aversion to my presence. They said and wrote things about me that were shocking, and they often forced me to stop and reflect on what might have caused such negative attitudes. One of the most jarring examples was one student's written account of how I did not "care about [her] education" and how I "don't want [her] to learn [any]thing in life." At first, I did not consider the possibility that race had anything to do with it. And even if it did, it was surely not the whole picture. As I reflected on my practice, however, I began to consider a wide range of factors that could conceivably have been at the root of my students' inclinations. The issue of race soon became the center of my investigation.

It is important to note that I am identifiably Indian, and that the previous experiences my students most often drew upon were the extreme stereotypes of South Asian immigrants found in the media. In the beginning, it was clear by the way they spoke and acted around me - calling me "Seven-Eleven," leaving the classroom shouting "Thank you, come again," and sometimes even calling me "Osama" - that they consciously reacted to my race, but it was unclear just how my race affected their ability to learn from me. As we read in Chris's course, recent studies have shown that, in some parts of the country, sharing a common racial or ethnic background with a teacher can improve a student's performance in school. In fact, Dee (2004) recently found that having an African-American teacher for just one year significantly increased the math scores of African-American students. It appears, then, that there may be some connection between student-teacher racial disparity and student achievement in the classroom.

While Dee's work brought some focus to my survey topic, the most influential reading for my practitioner research project was Claude Steele's *stereotype threat* theory (Steele, 1997). According to Steele's research, students often struggle during evaluations because of an anxiety that they might confirm negative stereotypes associated with their race or ethnicity. As a result, students tend to perform more poorly if they are actively or passively reminded (or, as Steele put it, 'primed') of their race before the evaluation. The goal of the student survey was to explore the question of whether or not *stereotype threat* might be one of the barriers that negatively impact my students' performance. I framed the investigation in the context of a special, contextualized type of stereotype threat, which I called *race difference threat*. In *race difference threat,* student perceptions of a classroom are negatively influenced by a racial or ethnic disparity between student and teacher. My theory assumes that successful adolescent development requires an educational environment in which children can openly communicate with adults and break down barriers that exist in their minds.

In order to study the question of whether or not stereotype threat - specifically *race difference threat* - played a role in my classroom, I conducted an informal survey in which my students rated my performance in six different areas: (1) assigning work, (2) collecting work, (3) giving feedback, (4) knowing names and relating to students, (5) being nice when speaking with students, and (6) not threatening students. The first group of students was a 'negative control group,' and they were not primed in any way. The second group of students, the 'race priming group,' filled in their race at the top of the survey. Finally, the 'race difference primed group,' filled in both their race and my race (See Figure 1). Interestingly, the survey results suggested that race only played a role in their responses to the final two survey questions (See Figure 2). In other words, when it came to teacher qualities important for the forging of relationships, race played an issue. For example, I was more "threatening" to students who were primed for race in some way, and this effect was exaggerated in the 'race primed group,' on the question of how friendly I was. Since I work in a team of teachers, many of whom share a similar racial disparity with our students, I began to discuss with them the possible implications of my survey results. In that way, during many informal teachers' lounge discussions, we began to unpack further the concept of *race difference threat* and to determine ways to address the issue on our hallway.

It is one thing to read developmental literature, but to see its principles come to life in my own classroom was inspiring, and it became a call to action. In light of the results of my final project, I became more and more aware of the possible manifestations of *race difference threat* as the year progressed. As a result of my work, I observed several critical incidents through a new lens - a lens that helped mold both my professional identity as a teacher and my dedication to social justice in the classroom.

One such incident was a shocking exchange between one of my most dedicated students - Tyrone - and an aging white teacher at our school. Over the course of the year, that teacher - Mr. D - had become accustomed to coming into my classroom to vent to me about his everyday frustrations.[1] I was always happy to hear out his complaints, because I always had some of my own.

At first, I had refused to acknowledge the racial undertones in his rants. Whenever he said something that other teachers might consider racist, I was the first to defend him and insist that we consider the great amount of time and effort that he put into leading extracurricular activities, tutoring struggling students after school, and maintaining and improving the aesthetics of the ninth grade hall; by any measure, his intentions were ostensibly good. It soon became clear to me, however, that his complaints about our students had deep, racial implications. Upon reflection, my initial inclination to give him the benefit of the doubt led him to view my classroom as a safe place for his most hateful complaints. With each new rant, his comments grew more and more intense, and I began to see why many other teachers chose to ignore all of the positive effort that Mr. D very obviously puts into his job. Unfortunately, I was often left in the awkward position of having to acknowledge his complaints while somehow subtly denouncing their racist tinges.

Clearly, I could not keep this up forever. One day, after school, Tyrone was helping me set up for a lab experiment for the following day. Mr. D suddenly barged into my classroom, shouting, "Darn, I can't believe them!" He went on to explain that some of his seventh period students had given him a "real hard time" and that he was thinking about retiring from teaching again. He looked at Tyrone for a second, and then continued, "Sometimes, they make me want to use the '*N*' word!" Complete silence. I did not know what to say, and Tyrone just looked at me as if expecting me to do something. The silence was finally broken when Mr. D suddenly started laughing, adding "Well, I guess I can't really get upset…they're just being who they are."

I could tell that Tyrone had been deeply affected by Mr. D's attitude and stinging words. It was almost as if Tyrone did not exist to him. Finally, after Mr. D had left for home, Tyrone broke down crying and asked me if he might be "one of *them.*" Apparently, Mr. D had been telling Tyrone—and other students performing well in his class—that they were "different" from the "others" and that they should not worry about the things that he says. I can only imagine what devastating effect this might have on a developing child's sense of identity. Tyrone, for example, rarely sits with other students during lunch, and this kind of incident could only serve to isolate him further from his peers. Not only could this jeopardize his relationships with other students, but it could also jeopardize his relationship with me. It was difficult for me to tell whether this incident was aiding in his development of a mistrust of Mr. D or a mistrust of the institution as a whole, which would inevitably include me.

According to my colleagues at the school, this was not an isolated incident. Over the years, Mr. D had somehow succeeded in retaining his position by demonstrating the amount of time that he dedicated to school improvement projects after school. Rather than immediately reporting the incident to our administration—which, apparently, has had absolutely no effect in the past —I decided to seek the help of my fellow TFA corps members during a structured seminar at Penn GSE that night. One corps member said that I needed to remember not to "beat around the bush" when addressing such overt acts of racism. Another member reminded me to make sure that I always "respect [my] colleagues," no matter what action I take. Still others insisted that I find different ways to "artfully express [my] discomfort." This last sentiment started off a round of debate about just what being "artful" meant. Some members of my discussion group argued that telling Mr. D about what our students say about him might be one way to raise his awareness without putting me in an awkward position. Another group of students thought that a "more positive approach" might prove fruitful. They suggested that I think of three good things to say about our students each time I get ready to eat lunch with Mr. D, so that I could subtly counter negative stereotypes with more positive ones. Hopefully, it would spur a better discussion and encourage him to think of his own positive things to say about our students.

While it was not a perfect solution, I went with it. Eventually, after many private discussions with Mr. D about our students, I worked up enough courage to confront him about his negative attitudes and the way in which our students already struggle with identity. Mr. D even took a look at the data from my survey, which he had seen me analyzing on several occasions. He did not show any particular interest in my statistical analyses, but he did acknowledge that his being a white teacher in a predominantly black school was often the source of a lot of stress for him, something he imagined that our students might also feel on some level.

In the end, I did write a formal report on the incident, but I was satisfied that I had also addressed the issue directly with Mr. D - an act that challenged me to take a risk when most of my colleagues insisted that the effort would ultimately prove to be a waste of time. Even if that confrontation was not a permanent solution, it opened up the possibility of future discussion.

Ever since that critical incident, I have become more assertive about addressing my students' needs, even when it involves confronting other teachers and school officials. More than ever, it has become clear to me that whatever changes I want to see on my hallway have to come from direct, unrelenting action. Over time, I have found that the most effective projects I have undertaken involve thoughtful collaboration with both students and teachers. For example, the Friday *class community discussions* I have implemented in my classroom represent one ongoing project that has had a positive impact on my personal and professional identity and on the identities of my students. It requires that we all take ownership of the classroom and the direction that it takes. Students become invested in the discussions and enjoy sharing their thoughts on both my performance and their own performance. Giving my students the floor and validating their concerns awakens many of them in a way that I have never seen before.

On paper, it sounds simple, but making actual progress in the classroom through these kinds of dialogue has taken a lot of time and hard work. It is clear that during my fist year, I cannot hope to eradicate stereotype threat and its negative impact on my students' ability to learn. I can, however, work to minimize its impact in my classroom and to encourage students to start reflecting on the source of their fears and anxieties. In the end, my primary responsibility is to help them feel safe in my presence - safe enough to have these cross-difference discussions. I feel at least some degree of accomplishment whenever I think about the fact that no student has called me "Osama" for over four months now. Meanwhile, even though Mr. D and I have grown apart, we have collaborated on a few assignments that show some potential for future collaboration. For instance, I have read several recent articles on teacher practices that target stereotype threat by using strategies that reduce its negative impact on student learning (Smith, 2004). As a result, I have begun enlisting the help of Mr. D to implement simple, intuitive strategies like assigning short essays in which students write about who they are and what makes them proud of themselves. These simple assignments have far surpassed all expectations; my students celebrate the opportunity to open up and share, something they do not always have the chance to do at school. I have the sense that they are beginning to understand how much I truly care about how they feel. As my students become more comfortable with me—and I with them—the potential effects of *race difference threat* can only be diminishing. Once they begin to understand how much I care about them, they stop hiding their feelings, and the honesty that this brings into the classroom is invaluable.

Reflecting back on how my practices have evolved over the year, I am thankful for my exposure to theoretical literature – developmental and otherwise -no matter how difficult it was at first to see their relevance in the classroom. Unlike most regions in which TFA places teachers, Philadelphia houses a large university that has the resources and initiative to support a highly-challenging graduate program for TFA corps members, which makes it possible for us to prepare for a potential career in education. As a result, my colleagues and I are enjoying a unique opportunity to grow as professional educators.

Part of this growth involves interacting with instructors who make tough decisions about how to prepare us for teaching in an urban setting. Chris was one of several instructors who made an effort to make the material both "accessible and relevant." To that end, his instructional team assigned a final project that challenged us to take the theoretical frameworks that we had developed and to make meaning out of them in our own classroom contexts.

Instead of promoting a *knowledge-for-practice* stance by emphasizing research on best practices in teaching, the final project followed the *knowledge-of-practice* stance by pushing us to build our own theoretical framework (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1999). Developmental theory served as a starting point for our reflections, but we each exercised our unique skill sets to construct and contextualize our own practitioner knowledge. In my case, a love of quantitative, statistical analyses drove me forward. A molecular biologist by training, I found it more meaningful to begin with numbers to help bring focus to my subsequent, deeper questioning. The developmental theory then provided rich material that framed my quantitative work. I needed to explore the environmental context in which Tyrone's exchange with Mr. D occurred, for example, before I could more fully understand and appreciate his perspective.

In contrast, many of my colleagues preferred a more qualitative approach from the beginning, sometimes leaving numbers out of it entirely. However we began our project, the end result was the same: We began to connect to our students and shape our professional identities. Those two processes are intimately related, and they lie at the core of efforts to use education as a vehicle for social justice. Throughout the process, the forum that our seminar discussions provided was invaluable to our growth, because it allowed us to seek help in interpreting and acting on our private reflections and practitioner research.

In retrospect, I do not wonder whether or not my training has provided me with the knowledge that I need to be a teacher. Rather, I wonder whether or not my training has empowered me to be effective in seeking out knowledge of my own teaching practice that is contextually meaningful. After all, it is that intimate knowledge of my practice that allows me to empower my students to develop their identities as I strive to develop my own.

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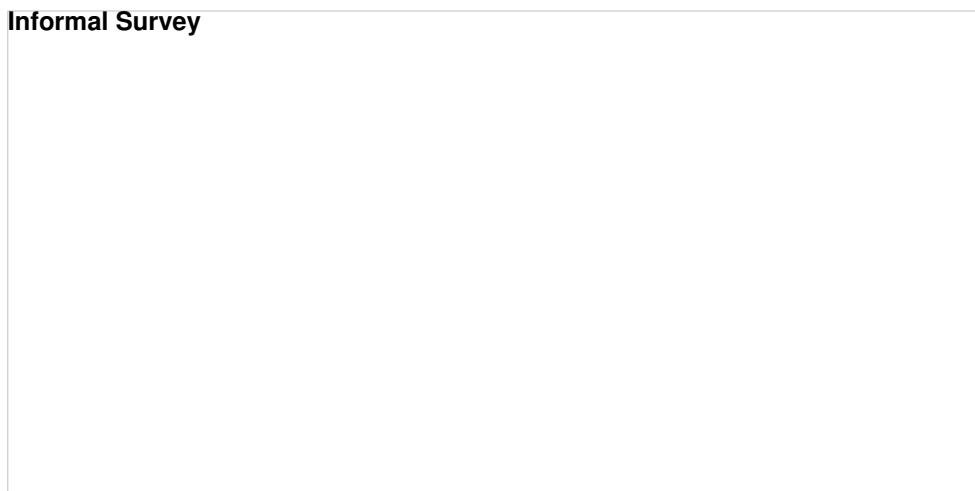
Figure 1 : Informal Survey

Informal Survey

Figure 2: Informal Survey Results

results

1 We have withheld some information and changed the names of "Tyrone" and "Mr. D" in order to protect their identities.

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