

## **Coming to care about teaching for social justice: The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (1950-1964)**

**Carol R. Rodgers\***

University at Albany, State University of New York

### **Abstract**

This article explores one teacher education program's experiment in "turning the souls" of its students to help them understand and care deeply about issues of race and social justice, as well as issues of environmental sustainability. The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education, (1950-1964) a small, "reconstructionist" program, was based upon Deweyan principles of choice, discovery, and student-generated learning and had as its underlying tenet a commitment to "change the world." These goals created a tension between the value of student independence and the program's political values and commitments. Nonetheless, students discovered reasons for education that lay beyond themselves, their experiences, the classroom, and their traditional notions of school. By immersing students in experiences that moved them emotionally, exposing their own, often disturbing, limited and limiting assumptions, students developed a willing accountability for changing their world. They came to care about social justice.

**Keywords:** Teacher education, social justice, Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education

\* Carol Rodgers is associate professor of education in the department of Educational Theory and Practice. Before coming to SUNY Albany in 2000, she taught for 20 years in the Masters of Arts in Teaching Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. Her teaching and research interests include reflective practice, the historical roots of reflection in the work of John Dewey and early progressive teacher education efforts, reflective teacher education and professional development. Her teaching and research interests include reflective practice, the historical roots of reflection in the work of John Dewey and early progressive teacher education efforts, and humanizing pedagogy.

## Introduction

[Transformation rests] neither on an agreement about what justice consists of nor on an analysis of how racism, sexism, or class subordination operates. Such arguments and analyses are indispensable. But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.

Cornel West (1993) *Race Matters*

The time-honored term for preparing those who work in the field of education is “teacher training.” The term implies the acquisition of a bag of tricks, the memorization of right answers and right methods, a concentration on techniques. In contrast, the Putney Graduate School uses the term “teacher education,” to imply not only great skill but the development of great love and great awareness. To prepare for teaching is a rigorous undertaking.

Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education Catalogue (c. 1950)

In this article<sup>1</sup>, I explore one teacher education program's experiment in “turning the souls” of its students to help them understand and care deeply about issues of race, social justice and environmental sustainability. The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (PGS), which ran from 1950 to 1964, was a small program connected to the Putney School of Putney, Vermont, founded by Carmelita Hinton, head of the Putney School, and directed by Morris R. Mitchell. The program was based upon John Dewey's principles of learning through reflection on experience and Theodore Brameld's “reconstructionist” principles of education for social justice. Specifically, PGS students learned through direct engagement with “places of quiet revolution,” (including Miles Horton's Highlander School, Citizenship Schools on the Sea Islands, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Harlem settlement houses, and examples of sustainable land development) with the aim of making society a more humane and harmonious place. Significantly for PGS and its curriculum, the program was book-ended by the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1950s and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Through a program that included living together in a mixed-race, mixed-nationality, mixed-age, and mixed-gender residence, studying and meeting leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, traveling together in a van over a period of several weeks to various sites of civil action in the deep South, and reflecting regularly on all these experiences, the program aimed to graduate “transformed” individuals, ready to act in the world to change it.<sup>2</sup>

In taking a radical stance, especially in conservative post World War II America, the program operated within an ecology of tensions. These tensions included seeing teachers as independent, critical change agents in a context that endorsed conformity; advocating for progressive education in a context of efficiency; and committing to social justice in a context of fear, institutional authoritarianism, and conservatism (Tyack, 1974, Tyack & Cuban, 1995). There were also tensions within PGS between the more radical ideals of the program, embodied by Morris Mitchell, and the more modest goals of his students, many of whom “just wanted to learn to teach.” True, they had chosen a radical program, but in many cases they were looking for a more interesting version of the familiar—school teachers to teach school subjects in school buildings. But Mitchell had different ideas. In effect, he believed that students would learn to teach by being students of a curriculum of social change and personal transformation, a view not necessarily shared by all of his students.

In this study I show that, despite a frequent lack of congruity between Mitchell's goals for his students and theirs for themselves, students' experiences in the program forced them to encounter themselves and the limitations of their understanding, and in the process assume an authority as both change agents *and* teachers. I show that, even though Mitchell's

personality and commitments wielded a tremendous amount of influence over what and how his students learned, these factors were, ironically, counter-balanced by the very independence of thought and action that he nurtured in them and structured into the curriculum, as well as by his genuine love for and faith in his students, even as they disappointed him.

The vivid and often dramatic historical threads that wove themselves through the fifties and early sixties were integral to the personal transformations that occurred at PGS. Often to their own surprise, students discovered reasons for education that lay beyond themselves, their experiences, the classroom, and their traditional notions of school.

Finally, I address a gap in the historical literature that David Cohen (1989) has called “virgin territory”—“historical studies that can reference teachers’ encounters with students over academic subjects...what teachers and students did together” (pp. 394-398). Though Cohen is talking about encounters between schoolteachers and their students, the same historical lack exists for teacher educators and their students. Through access to a number of documents including students’ Cumulative Files (which included journals, papers, study plans, schedules, responses from teachers, class notes, and personal and collaborative accounts of the trips South), letters from students, as well as Morris Mitchell’s papers, and interviews with graduates and others involved in the program,<sup>3</sup> I have been able to develop an account of what Morris Mitchell and his graduate students “did together.” The details of their encounters, as told through documents and interviews, paints a picture of teacher-student interaction and learning that bears little resemblance to the traditional teacher-student encounters Cohen probably had in mind. Yet the record conveys the deeply personal, conflicted, and often dramatic nature of a teacher education program that aimed at transformational learning and teaching for social justice.

### **Teaching for Social Justice**

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2004) notes that society’s beliefs and values about the purposes of education provide the context for teacher education policy today. She observes that contemporary policies of accountability, particularly the “relentless focus” on high stakes testing for both students and teachers, point to a number of assumptions: “teaching is a technical activity, knowledge is static, good practice is universal, being prepared to teach is knowing subject matter, and pupil learning is equal to higher scores on high-stakes tests” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 161). Education is thus seen as the most efficient way to “grow the economy,” turn out productive workers, and compete successfully in the global economy, a policy strikingly redolent of the 1950s. Teaching for social justice, by contrast, emphasizes a different set of values. From this stance, the purpose of education is seen as preparing “all people for meaningful work and for free and equal civic participation in a democratic society,” and teaching is regarded as “an intellectual activity, knowledge ... as constructed and fluid, good practice is contextual, and pupil learning includes academic achievement as well as developing critical habits of mind and preparation for civic engagement” (ibid, p. 161).

Related to teacher education for social justice is an approach to teacher education that focuses on a “critical pedagogy of place.” David Gruenewald (2002; 2003) challenges advocates of social justice teacher education to broaden their scope to include environmental stewardship. A critical pedagogy of place, writes Gruenewald, “aims to evaluate the appropriateness of our relationships to each other, and to our *socio-ecological* places... [and] to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (italics in original, 2002, p. 9). He advocates taking children and teachers out of the limited space of classrooms, and immersing them in the spaces where

they live. By creating a connection to a place – and, I argue, the historical events that are the lifeblood of a place – a commitment to the welfare of those who inhabit the place is created.

While many of today's teacher education programs use the terms "social justice," "diversity," and even "critical pedagogy of place," in their descriptions of themselves and the courses they offer, too often they are add-ons without the requisite, deep-structure transformation necessary, not just in a program curriculum, but in teacher educators themselves.

To be long-lasting, such learning requires personal transformation. As Cochran-Smith (2004), Linda Darling-Hammond *et al* (2002), and others (Ladson-billings, 2001; Nieto, 2000; Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Author, 1996; Weiler, 2002) have noted, becoming a teacher, or teacher educator, committed to social change requires a fundamental shift in the way one views the world, one's place in it, and one's relationship to others. This is not accomplished in a course, or even in a year, but over a lifetime of conscious teaching and shared inquiry and reflection. To make a difference, they note, teachers must care from the inside out — rather than because they should — about social justice issues. At PGS accountability became a personal matter of will, rather than an external matter of policy. Students' learning experiences awakened a passion and vision within themselves, which are at the heart of good teaching, where souls are turned.

### **Structure of the Article**

I begin with a brief portrait of Morris Mitchell and the Graduate School program. I then offer a brief description of the teaching and learning that occurred there, followed by an account of students' experiences on the Study Tour. Although the graduate school curriculum took a number of forms, (seminars, short field trips, visiting lecturers, and apprenticeships) the most powerful was the Study Tour. The object was to insert students into the midst of social and environmental problems—from racism to strip mining—and to introduce them to innovative responses. I conclude with a brief discussion and implications for progressive teacher education today.

### **Morris Mitchell**

Morris Mitchell's philosophy of education and his ideas for its implementation were shaped by his family and his experiences as a young student, as a soldier in World War I, and as a new teacher in Ellerbe, South Carolina. These experiences were then given theoretical shape by contact, both direct and through their writings, with John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, and Theodore Brameld.

Born in 1895, Mitchell grew up in a family of educators. His father, Samuel Chiles Mitchell (1864-1948), was a professor of history, first at the University of Richmond (1895-1908), and then at Brown University (1908-1909), and later became president of the Universities of South Carolina (1908-1913), and Delaware (1914-1920). He was also a long-time trustee of the Negro Rural School Fund of the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation (1908-1937).<sup>4</sup> He made his three sons and daughter aware of how their privilege—financially modest as it was—contrasted with those less fortunate than they. Their father's conviction that it was the moral duty of educated whites to play an instrumental part in changing the lot of the Southern poor became their own. Morris Mitchell as well as his two brothers, both of whom became active in education and civil rights in the South, committed themselves to making a difference.

Young Mitchell was not a strong student. He had difficulty doing the prescribed tasks, sitting still, and paying attention. His mother, in a diary entry, tells the story of nine-year-old Mitchell's tale of his own misbehavior.

“Today at school,” [Mitchell said], “they were all making *more fuss!* And Miss Kate kept ringing the bell and trying to get order, and *trying* to get order; and you ought to've heard her calling, '*Morris!*' And they *wouldn't* stop!”<sup>5</sup>

He deeply resented “forced” education,<sup>6</sup> and was asked to leave two different schools, one public, and one private. Mitchell finally graduated from high school in 1912, after which he attended the University of South Carolina, the University of Virginia, and Delaware College. In April of 1917 he entered the army and trained for service in World War I, returning after the war to graduate from Delaware College in June of 1919.

Mitchell's time in the army shaped him profoundly. “The *only* thing I know,” he would pronounce after his return from the front, “is that I will NEVER have anything to do with war.”<sup>7</sup> While in France as a lieutenant, he saw many of his men killed and wounded. Mitchell himself nearly perished from gas poisoning and serious wounds. He was sent to Panges les Eaux and St. Armand<sup>8</sup> to recover, and although he begged his commanding officers to send him back to the front, and believed strongly in the “priceless cause” of the First World War, the experience transformed Mitchell into an ardent pacifist.

Mitchell returned to the States after the war and settled in the small town of Ellerbe, North Carolina, where he accepted his first teaching job. It was in Ellerbe that he first made efforts to blur the lines between community and school. Rather than teach “subjects,” Mitchell (Mitchell/Chaffee, 1928) asked his students to find out what their small town needed, and their curriculum arose from the needs of the town, which, among other things, included constructing their own school. Their curriculum arose from the needs of the town. This included constructing their own school. He and the town, led by his students, raised money to buy the land and the materials for the school. They used shrubs from the surrounding forest for the school's landscaping. “Even the derricks by which they erected great scissor rafters, weighing a ton each, were of [the students] own contriving,” recalled Mitchell (*ibid*, p. 499). He gradually built the population of the school from a mere dozen students to enough to require three teachers in his first year there. According to his own account, about half of the graduates of Ellerbe School went on to become teachers. Mitchell felt this was due to the fact that the learning which they had experienced there was laced with the purpose of improving the community. The method proved durable. A *Reader's Digest* article written in 1937 describes how, nearly 20 years later, the school's learning experiences and community's development still meshed. “They learn by doing,” wrote the author, who had visited Ellerbe.

The curriculum wanders over into life, eats big chunks of it, and comes back into the classroom permanently enriched. I saw a class spending one of its periods giving blood tests to a neighbor's chickens, and another which went outdoors to study Caesar and fight battles with the Helvetians in North Carolina's sand. I saw an arithmetic teacher's classroom, in which the children were about to start a bank with money printed by the school press [which also served as the town's source of printed material.] (p. 40)

Such synergistic relationships between schools and communities, whereby the development of the community was the job of the school and its students, and the development of students the job of the community, remained themes throughout Mitchell's career.

Mitchell earned a doctorate at George Peabody College for Teachers at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in 1926. During this time he also studied for a year under John Dewey at Columbia Teachers College. It was his exposure to Dewey and Dewey's ideas as well as those of William Heard Kilpatrick, that first gave Mitchell the confidence that the kind of learning he had facilitated in Ellerbe was not only legitimate but was also articulated and endorsed by the nation's leading educational philosophers. In particular, he drew upon Dewey's belief that education was the reconstruction of experience through a process of reflection, and upon Kilpatrick's application of Dewey's theory in the project method. The project method placed the "purposeful act," an activity in line with a child's own goals, in a "social environment" which looked toward the welfare of the group. Such views saw the world not as static, with a fixed set of facts to memorize, but as changing, whereby knowledge was constantly being reconstructed.

### **The Putney Graduate School**

The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (also known as Glen Maples) was founded in 1950 by Carmelita Hinton, then director of the Putney School, a private, progressive, college preparatory school located in Putney, Vermont. Hinton conceived the Graduate School along the lines of the Shady Hill Teacher Apprentice Program in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she had taught. Shady Hill operated under the direction of Katharine Taylor who came to Shady Hill from a teaching position at the Francis W. Parker School in Chicago. Shady Hill's model for teacher education placed student teachers in the midst of the life of the school. As a progressive program, discussion focused largely on children and their learning. As Taylor put it, they asked not "What did I teach today?" but "What did students learn?" and heeded the difference between the two questions.

Mitchell came to Glen Maples on the recommendation of Edward Yeomans, a Shady Hill colleague and friend of Hinton, who had met Mitchell at the Macedonia Cooperative Community in Georgia where Mitchell had lived and worked. To the surprise and often the chagrin of both Hinton and the board, however, once Mitchell started, he took the Graduate School in a different direction from what Hinton and her faculty had expected. This underlying tension between Mitchell and the Putney School undoubtedly added to the other tensions that the Graduate School students experienced during their time at Glen Maples. Mitchell sought to immerse students in experiences that would provoke them to reflect on themselves and their beliefs, schools, school systems, and, most importantly, society and its problems. It promoted self-knowledge, learning with others in community, working towards social change with a global perspective, and reflection on experience as a means of developing an awareness that lifted them beyond the boundaries of self and the comfort of the familiar. Hinton and the Board were progressive, but looking for something more conventional and closer to home—a program that would prepare teachers to teach their students, rather than a critique of their own methods and beliefs.

Mitchell recruited students from countries as diverse as India, Pakistan, Sweden, Kenya, Jamaica, and Haiti. Every class was multi-racial and international and included men and women, students from the inner city and rural areas, students from the Deep South, married students and their families, single students, and students from working- as well as middle-class backgrounds. When students were unable to pay tuition, Mitchell found benefactors, arranged no-interest loans, or simply allowed students to attend for free.<sup>9</sup>

Mitchell designed the program so that the curriculum was determined in large part by the students themselves, guided by their personal interests, and also determined by Mitchell and his vision of what the world needed. This remained one of the essential tensions in the program. He believed in a student-generated curriculum that adhered to the needs and

interests of students, and yet he was passionately attached to changing the world according to his values.

Mitchell believed that skillful teaching began with self-knowledge. To teach children in a “crisis world” demanded traditional [teacher] skills and interests but also

new concerns and abilities: a wide knowledge of the world and its peoples, an involvement in human problems, and the skill to lead others to knowledge and involvement; a deep sense of the fundamental unity of mankind and at the same time of its vitalizing diversity, and the need and ability to communicate that sense; an informed understanding of the active nature of learning and of ways to encourage that activity; least tangibly but most importantly, such self-knowledge and awareness as will furnish a constant and secure base for the interaction of one human being with others such that they, too, will gain awareness and the security of deep self-knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

Mitchell often said to his students that “a teacher teaches who a teacher is. (...) To know what he is purveying, [a teacher] must know himself as deeply and honestly as he can.”<sup>11</sup> To this end he required students to “test their purposes by working to carry them out,” documenting these activities in an on-going portfolio called the Cumulative File, and meeting regularly with both him and their classmates for “counseling sessions” focused on their work.<sup>12</sup>

To prepare his students in the basic skills of school teaching alone was clearly too limited a goal for Mitchell. A degree from Putney, he wrote, “demonstrated [a graduate’s] preparation and readiness for leadership in a school, a community project, a social agency, an industrial organization, or some other place where education can aid in the reconstruction of human society.”<sup>13</sup> He felt strongly that the way to educate teachers for such a role was to immerse them in experiences that would move them emotionally, compel them to understand deeply, and ultimately act to change the contexts in which they lived and worked.

The program, which generally ran from September to June, included seminars where students examined progressive, “reconstructionist,” and traditional approaches to education as well as big ideas like urban decay and renewal, environmental sustainability, and Civil Rights. In addition, there were short and long trips to what Mitchell called “places of quiet revolution” — progressive schools, rural Vermont sustainable wood lots, and settlement houses in New York City. There were also apprenticeships of the students’ choice. These took place in progressive elementary and high schools, like the Putney School, in non-traditional schools for adults like the Penn Community Center in the Sea Islands or the Highlander School, in social agencies like the Settlement houses in New York, and other places where social change through education was a priority. The year ended with a summation of the students’ learning through the writing of a master’s thesis. The final days of the program consisted of in-depth, group-generated evaluations of the program and suggestions for the following year.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, there were no grades at Glen Maples. Instead, students kept portfolios that included autobiographies, outlines of short- and long-range plans, seminar papers, journal accounts of trips, and reflections on daily living and learning. Mitchell saw these Cumulative Files as the place where structured reflection on experience would happen. The following description mirrors closely Dewey’s (1933) own description of the reflective process:

The cumulative file is of great importance. It documents for each student his own learning: the encountering of obstacles and their preliminary analysis; the choice of the most promising possibilities; the testing of one or several of those possible

solutions; the eventual answer arrived at and the progress which that answer makes possible. As a reconstruction of such experiences, the writing of the cumulative file constitutes a vital learning activity in itself.<sup>15</sup>

The file also provided a starting place from which to explore and articulate one's philosophy of education. Most importantly for Mitchell, it served as the foundation from which students would take action to change society. Mitchell wrote,

In arriving at his own philosophy, [the student] is expected to study and evaluate the philosophies of others, always in the light of his growing awareness of himself, of the world around him and its problems, of the potentialities of education to aid or lead in the reconstruction of society. (*Ibid*, pp. 14, 15)

While the curriculum was student-generated, Mitchell did have a method. It grew out of his understanding of Dewey and Dewey's concept of reconstructing experience through systematic reflection. (See Rodgers, 2002 for a full discussion of Dewey's view of reflection). So while the experiences would shift according to the year and the group, the method of learning from them remained consistent.

Mitchell felt that all of these learning experiences comprised a foundation from which students would learn how to teach. He believed that "the method of teaching [was] in the learning." His sights, it appears, were not set on preparing teachers as much as they were focused on preparing human beings. While it can be argued (as Mitchell did, persuasively) that there is no difference—that we teach who we are—there are elements of pedagogy that must be explicitly named and not just absorbed through osmosis. The rudiments of teaching and an understanding of learning can be found in the phenomena of learning, but they do not announce themselves; they must be teased out with the guidance of those who have reflected on the teaching-learning relationship and see it clearly. There is ample evidence that Mitchell *did* see the relationship clearly, but his priority was that his students understand social issues rather than pedagogy. The following section explores students' experiences in one aspect of the PGS curriculum, the Study Tour, which illustrates the kind of learning and teaching experience that happened outside the walls of the classroom.

### **The Study Tour**

For this study, I interviewed eleven Glen Maples alumni from the first to the last (1951–1965) class, and many classes in-between. Those whom I interviewed were largely determined by whom I could locate after nearly fifty years. However, I believe that the group I interviewed is broadly representative of those who attended Glen Maples. The group consisted of men and women, U.S. citizens and foreign students, black and white, those who loved the program and those who had a harder time with it, although I usually could find both in the same person.

The Study Tour brought together all aspects of the program. It forced students to live and travel and make decisions together as a community and it brought them face-to-face with social problems like racism and environmental devastation, but also quiet yet powerful efforts at social change. Inevitably, it put students in contact with themselves—their beliefs and assumptions, both noble and disturbing.

The Study Tour usually headed to the Deep South. While no two trips were the same, they shared the theme of social change through education. In the pages that follow, I give a brief overview of the fall term and preparation for the tour, and then patch together episodes from several different trips, drawing on Mitchell's records as well as material from students' Cumulative Files and interview accounts.



The Study Tour served as a testing ground for the ideas introduced in the fall (namely, an introduction to reconstructionist education—Brameld, Dewey, and Kilpatrick—and an overview of current social concerns) both in terms of the social movements the tour explored and the educational structure that the tour represented.

Caroline Pierce,<sup>16</sup> a member of the sixth Graduate School class, and her cohort traveled South in the spring of 1956, not quite two years after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had been rendered (May 17, 1954). She and her twelve classmates<sup>17</sup> loaded into two Volkswagen vans to see what that decision meant for the South. According to Pierce, before setting out on the trip, the group, along with Mitchell, had agreed to several things: any place where they ate or slept would have to accept the whole group; they would always eat inside a place rather than settle for a take-out meal; and, they would encounter any racial aggression with non-violence (CR, interview, March 1997). In this group's case, they did not wait long for an opportunity to put their resolutions to the test. The chef in their first restaurant in Maryland, according to Pierce, burst from the kitchen and headed towards John Fallon, the African-American member of the group. Waving a long butcher knife in John Fallon's face he yelled, "Get your f--- black ass out of here!" Rather than risk putting John Fallon and themselves in danger, they left the restaurant. Later, in a separate incident in Georgia, white men driving a truck full of manure followed Pierce and John Fallon. They reportedly threw manure at the two by the shovelful as they drove by. John Fallon and Pierce, clinging to their promise of non-violence, kept on walking. Pierce said that Mitchell used these incidents and others like them to "push the borders" of the group's understanding. According to Pierce, he constantly asked probing questions: "What would make a man do something like that? What are the forces of the community that may have influenced his behavior? How did it make you feel? What are the different ways we might have responded?" Questions like these put students "at the edge of their knowing," drawing from the emotional depths of their recent experience. There was, in the words of one, a deeply "felt need" to put meaning to such experiences.

On that second day of Pierce's trip the group covered 240 miles, from Bergen, New Jersey to Washington, D.C., starting at 7:30 in the morning and ending at 9:30 that night, with visits to four separate towns. The previous day the group drove to New York City from Putney, visited the United Nations, attended a briefing there, met with William Heard Kirkpatrick in his home on Morningside Drive, dined at Teachers College, and, according to Pierce, met with a gentleman named Mike Giles in Englewood, New Jersey to talk about "conflict episode analysis with reference to present racial tensions in the South," finally arriving, exhilarated but exhausted, in Bergen.

Two regular Study Tour destinations were Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School<sup>18</sup> in Monteagle, Tennessee and the Citizenship Schools along the coast of South Carolina. Mitchell admired Horton's approach to education. It represented to him the best kind of marriage between education and social change—a reconstructionist ideal. Myles Horton was a man of principle combined with action (or what Friere [1970] would call action-reflection or *praxis*). Horton's most significant work was with labor unions in the 1930s and 1940s and with the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

Study Tour groups met with Horton, sat in on his seminars, and listened to tapes of seminars, including one of Rosa Parks, who was trained at Highlander, "telling how," recounted Pierce, "being tired and disgusted, she took that first step which resulted in the Montgomery bus boycott."

Highlander was also responsible for helping to found the Citizenship Schools of the 1950s and 1960s. Citizenship Schools were started so that adults—primarily Southern

blacks—would have a place where they could come to learn to read in order that they might be able to vote. Bernice Robinson, a beautician and participant at Highlander, and the niece of Septima Clark<sup>19</sup>, was the first teacher in the first of these schools. Building on Clark's pedagogy that sought to "teach [children] the words that they used everyday" (Horton, 1990, p. 115), Robinson and her students:

developed the curriculum day by day. They learned to write letters, order catalogs and fill out money orders. They made up stories about the vegetables they grew and the tools they used. "They tell me a story," Mrs. Robinson told us [at Highlander], "a story which I write down, then they learn to read the story. It's their story in their words, and they are interested because it's theirs." (p. 103)

Graduate School students visited one of these schools in Frogmore, on St. Helena Island, off the north Georgian coast. Philip Torrey, a member of the class of 1963, wrote enthusiastically of his experience at the school in Frogmore, sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), explicitly making his own connection between what he experienced there and the ideas he had gotten from his studies at the Graduate School:

Classes of the SCLC Teacher Training program were such thrilling exhibitions of the real dynamics of teaching that I could scarcely believe my eyes and ears. This is exactly what we have been talking about at Putney: This is the reconstruction of education. A purposeful, direct approach to the educational problem at hand with forceful, clean, step-by-step procedures toward getting the job done with no deviation and no claptrap. The intriguing technique of teaching by asking, not telling, is beautifully demonstrated by Dorothy Cotton. She said, "Teachers do not tell but ask; this is the art of teaching. Let students agonize over it, with the teacher to only guide them to stay on the point; let them testify and teach themselves. Then they will never forget."<sup>20</sup>

It is not difficult to understand that participation in such a historically and personally significant event, whose purpose reached beyond those involved to the very shaping of society, would make an impact strong enough to radicalize participants. *Being there* mattered. Torrey was able, in Woodhouse and Knapp's (2000) words, to "connect place with self and community."

Another regular stop on the tour was Ducktown, Georgia. Ducktown was a ruined copper mining town. By all accounts, the devastation of Ducktown, by then abandoned and bleeding from the erosion of its red clay soils, was horrifying. "Caverns of hell!" wrote Hank Carson. No vegetation, little life of any kind, and terrific poverty. The injustice of the plight of those living in Ducktown compared to those who had come, mined, and grown rich, leaving little of the wealth behind, made Carson's group intensely angry. "No amount of reading," they wrote, "could leave such an impression. ... If a picture is really worth a thousand words, then an experience is worth a thousand books."<sup>21</sup> They continued,

As we drove over the red and dry plains of Georgia, we saw the dark faces of intimidated Negroes who lived in poor unpainted sheds, the sun shining through the rotten boards. But less than a hundred feet from these miserable dwellings we saw the beautiful brick house of the landlord.<sup>22</sup>

This experience was countered by visits to the Guntersville Dam of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The access to electricity that resulted from a sustainable use of natural resources, as well as the natural beauty of the area, contrasted with the ecological devastation and economic disparity of Ducktown. However, there is evidence in the record and in interviews, that his students did not always share Mitchell's passion for the TVA. "Those damn dams," as one alumna put it. Environmental issues resonated less with students than did Civil

Rights, perhaps because Civil Rights were more obviously human in dimension and directly applicable to their own experience, whereas dams and strip mining seemed too big and too far from their own lives.

One of the most powerful of the group's experiences with Civil Rights was their impromptu trip to Montgomery, Alabama in December of 1956 to participate in the one-year anniversary of the bus boycott. Apparently one member of the group took off to visit Montgomery on his own. Inspired by the interracial workshops on non-violent protest he had witnessed at Highlander, the student felt moved to see the results of such work up close. He not only witnessed the bus boycott, but also had the chance to talk directly with Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy. He was so excited by this contact and by what he found happening in Montgomery, that he came back and asked the group to return with him. In their group Cumulative File, students wrote of the group process by which they decided to go to Montgomery as well as the experience itself. The process of democratic group decision-making and student-generation of an emergent curriculum represented two other aspects of the experience of the Study Tour, as the group noted in their collaborative account of the trip:

When this message was brought back to the group, a situation developed that is indicative of the kind of education that is offered at Glen Maples. ... The group sat down and weighed [reasons for not going] against the reality of the opportunity to study concretely how a creative principle, the principle of non-violent resistance, was being applied in a constructive way and how it was being effective in bringing about social change. ... We felt very strongly at that moment the value of an education where students and teachers in a given and very real ... situation together take on responsibility for the formulation of the program. The curriculum is "emerging," it evolves out of circumstances and is adaptable to the needs of the student group. This particular instance is only an example of what happens fairly often within the general structure of the Graduate School's program. Thus it was that Dr. Martin Luther King became the teacher of this school for a few days.<sup>23</sup>

This is compelling evidence of students assuming agency, first, for their learning, second, for the curriculum, and third, for effecting change in the place and time that they inhabited. And yet, as powerful as this experience surely was, whether the decision-making process was truly democratic was called into question by at least one graduate. Carson confides that when it came to "decisions," the word should always be put in quotes. "Morris made the decisions and then spent sometimes hours or even days, trying to get the one or two dissenters to agree. We quickly learned to go along and save the time."<sup>24</sup> This could be evidence of Mitchell's strong will, or it could also be Carson's misinterpretation of a consensus method that grew out of Mitchell's grounding in Quaker practices and beliefs.

To his credit, as powerful as an encounter with King was, Mitchell was careful that his students talk with proponents of opposing views, or perhaps it was a way of underscoring the importance of King's work. To this end, he arranged a meeting with Sam Englehardt, Alabama state Senator and executive secretary of the state's White Citizens' Council, which was formed in opposition to school integration after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Students found the meeting "more than overwhelming." They characterized the senator as "arrogant, ignorant, suspicious and extremely defensive" and found the visit "disconcerting and pathetic."<sup>25</sup> It appears that, rather than rounding out their understanding, the encounter seems to have drawn a stark portrait of good and evil. Although no one would argue about who was on the right side, there is no evidence that the complexities of the issues (fear, economic threats, threatened social order, or unwitting complicity) were explored. Yet the emotional impact of the visit is undeniable.

This was followed up by discussions with two local scholars, one a sociologist who was studying the effect of non-violent protest on the people of the Civil Rights Movement, and the other a professor of religion who discussed the role that Christianity played in the movement. In addition, the group was housed with “prominent Negro families” in the city. Discussion with these men and women, all involved with the Civil Rights movement, added yet another layer to students’ understanding. They left Montgomery with the feeling that the success of the Civil Rights movement depended not on any particular group but “with the masses of the people who have found new dignity and unity in their constructive protest against injustice. The buses run empty through the streets of Montgomery, and only the masses can keep them empty.”<sup>26</sup>

For one member of the group, Nan Fields, the trip to Montgomery was the most significant visit of the Study Tour, but still took second place to her experience traveling through the South in a van in a mixed-race group. As a Southerner herself, the “laboratory of human relations” that the “race relations” part of the trip represented held special meaning. It related to her personal past, to her present sense of herself, and to her future teaching. (Fields went on to teach elementary school for 40 years.) The depth of the emotional content of the experience caused her to “reconstruct” her past as a Southerner, and in essence, to change her relationship to that old self. In the passage below she makes sense of that past and her own reactions. She states the importance of bringing long-held assumptions to light, stressing the role that emotion and genuine interracial interaction played in her transformation.

[The racial situation] was, for me, a truly educational experience. By racial situation I do not mean just Montgomery. Montgomery, as an isolated experience, would have had much less meaning. My “education” came from experiencing Montgomery in the context of our entire experience as an interracial group. Growing up as a Southerner, I absorbed as a child the Southern view toward the Negro. However, a change such as [I have experienced] seems to involve the emotions far more than the mind. (...) When [growing up], I lived within a group for whom discrimination was a basic assumption. I had never been able to know or even meet the Southern Negro in a social situation.

She goes on to describe how she was brought out of herself and the sphere of her past experience by having to live and work closely with people different from herself. In addition, she was able to connect the “stultification of the Negro” with the social context—segregation and racism—that caused it.

This trip introduced me, for the first time, to a direct experience of the tragedy and stultification of the Negroes caused by [segregation and racism]. For the first time I have an emotional understanding of the effect of segregation on a human being’s view of himself. This came through both the experience of living and traveling as a Negro [lives and travels] and through coming to know some of the members of the Negro community of Montgomery, and discussing their own experiences with them. Such experiences could not help but bring about a personal change.

Finally, she links her awareness with the imperative to act.

... I think that the average person will resist any threat to the *status quo*. He will not change his attitudes unless forced to by some type of pressure. An unbelievably immoral situation is now existing, which must be corrected. It is not only right to do so, it is a grave responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

On the trip Fields not only encountered the realities of the situation, but she also encountered herself. She told me the story of being asked to cut the hair of her African-

American classmate, Carson. “I caught myself feeling revolted, and I was so ashamed,” she recounts. She and Carson were close friends, and yet this old and deep response, learned from years of listening to other voices, put her in undeniable contact with the truth of her own prejudice. But what mattered was not so much the fact of the prejudice as her acknowledgement of it, and her pushing through and beyond it, with the love and respect she felt for him. This, it seems to me, speaks of the real work of turning the soul: putting students in relationship with others different from themselves, within the context of compelling places and events (outside the classroom), and ultimately with themselves. Clearly, Fields, as a result of her experiences, felt accountable *from within* rather than because of externally imposed standards of accountability.

In a concluding section of the group Cumulative File on the Study Tour of the autumn of 1956, students, in their reports on the Tour, listed the ways in which the trip had been valuable. Among a list of 22 items were the following four, which indicate a marked shift in awareness of the group resulting from the Tour:

- The comprehension of the imperative need of conserving our natural resources as a responsibility to future generations;
- The awareness of the glaring discrepancy in places in side-by-side wealth and poverty;
- The realization that education is as broad as life and an ever-continuing process;
- The belief that school and community are interacting, [and that] each should build the other.<sup>28</sup>

The group concluded their evaluation of the trip by noting that it had been “transformative.” Not only did they have knowledge that they did not have before, but their “whole beings” were changed in ineffable ways by the knowledge they gained and the way in which they had gained it.

Our whole beings have reacted in this intensive learning experience. We have strengthened our belief in considering both sides of questions, and in working out solutions through understanding and cooperation. The effect on us is so complex and profound that it is impossible to convey it completely by the written word.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

To educate a teacher is an enormous, and always incomplete, endeavor. The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education did not provide a solution to the problem of how to educate teachers for social justice, but it does provide insight into how teacher education might teach teachers to *care* about teaching for social justice.

While many teacher education programs today advocate a critical stance, insisting that their teacher-students be committed to looking at the “social and political consequences of [his or her] teaching” (p. 59), how teacher-students *come to hold* these commitments remains a question. What if students of teaching don’t care? Is in-depth consideration of such issues enough to awaken a dormant social consciousness or create one where none existed? The Graduate School experiment suggests that commitment to issues of social justice – a willing accountability – comes not from program requirements but from a place of internal authority that is the outgrowth of personal transformation, and that such transformation is the result of personal encounters with issues of the time – and history – through direct contact with the people and places that embody those issues.

For change to be lasting, for souls to be turned, teacher-students must have direct experience with compelling contemporary issues, engage in internal and communal reflection,

articulate their own needs and plans, and be guided by teacher educators and mentors who are doing the same, all of which will give them insight into themselves, the society in which they live, and institutions in which they work, and ground them in the authority of their own experience and reflection.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a longer article, “The Turning of One’s Soul”: Learning to teach for social justice: The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (1950-1964), published in 2006 in *Teachers College Record*, [108(7), pp. 1266-1295]. It is published here with permission from *Teachers College Record*.

<sup>2</sup>From “Report to the Trustees: Putney Graduate School,” For the Meeting, March 28, 1953, 6. The Mitchell papers, #3832 in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

<sup>3</sup> These “others” included colleagues of Mitchell’s from Putney and Friends World College, the Putney town moderator at the time the school existed, an alumnus of New College at Columbia Teachers College where Mitchell taught, Putney School faculty, and Mitchell family members.

<sup>4</sup> The Mitchell papers, #3832 in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

<sup>5</sup> From Alice B. Mitchell’s record of her children, September 3, 1899. Personal Collection of Alice Blachly.

<sup>6</sup> Alice B. Mitchell, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mitchell’s niece, Alice Blachly, daughter of his sister, Mary Clifford, February, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> This was probably a conflation that should have been St.-Amand-les-Eaux, a picturesque village with thermal baths, located in the Département du Nord, not far from the places of battle.

<sup>9</sup> The Mitchell papers, #3832 in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill. This was another source of friction between Mitchell and Hinton and the board.

<sup>10</sup> From the Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education Catalog, (nd), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jay Stone, February 20, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> From the Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education Catalog, (nd), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Some of these evaluations were taped and are part of the historical record. In all cases they were used to plan the next year’s program.

<sup>15</sup> Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education Catalogue, (nd), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> All names have been changed.

<sup>17</sup> These included five women and seven men; one Indian, one African American, two Swedes, and one Swiss; graduates of Hunter College, Bard College, Goddard College, Principia, the University of Chicago, McGill, Sarah Lawrence, Brooklyn College, the University of Basel, and Case Institute of Technology; all students were between the ages of 24 and 39.

<sup>18</sup> The Highlander Folk School, now the Highlander Research and Education Center, was founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, Don West, and James Dombrowski. In its early days Highlander provided training and education for the labor movement throughout the Southern United States, and the Civil

Rights Movement. It trained, among others, Rosa Parks, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Septima Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis and Ralph Abernathy.

<sup>19</sup>Septima Clark was a key figure at Highlander. She was a black woman from the Sea Islands who was educated at Teachers College in the 1930s and later at Highlander. She worked tirelessly for Civil Rights and eventually helped Horton to direct the Center. (Horton, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Philip Torrey, "The Sea Islands," *Group Cumulative File*, 1963-1964, 92. Personal collection, Todd Bayer.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> From the "Reports on the Southern Study Tour of school, community, and regional development, November 1 to December 8, 1956," 10.

<sup>23</sup> Nan Fields, Cumulative File, "Reports on the Southern Study Tour, Nov. 1 to Dec. 8, 1956," 17. Antioch College Records, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

<sup>24</sup> Hank Carson, e-mail correspondence with author, May 15, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Nan Fields, *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cumulative File, "Reports on the Southern Study Tour, Nov. 1 to Dec. 8, 1956," 19. Antioch College Records, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

<sup>27</sup> Nan Fields, "Evaluation of the TVA Study Tour, 1956," 4. Antioch College Records, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

<sup>28</sup> From the "Reports on the Southern Study Tour of school, community, and regional development, November 1 to December 8, 1956," pp. 25, 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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