

Changing Perceptions of Teacher Candidates in High-Needs Schools

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ABSTRACT: Candidates enter teacher education programs with established beliefs about diversity and urban education. These belief systems impact decisions that teacher candidates make both now and in the future. Providing opportunities for candidates to spend quality time in an urban Professional Development School (PDS) setting with the support and guidance of university professors and highly qualified teachers and administrators can ultimately mold and shape their perceptions in a positive manner. This study shows how candidates' perceptions changed over the course of a semester after having been placed in an urban PDS environment.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #2/A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; #3/Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; and #5/Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants

Introduction

The United States has experienced a growth in ethnic and cultural diversity for quite some time (Smiley, 2006). However, at the university level, departments of teacher education are faced with the challenge of preparing teacher candidates who, for the most part, come from white, middle class backgrounds (Artiles et.al, 2000; Smiley, 2006). The preparation of these teacher candidates for the urban classroom is particularly important as the country faces growing shortages of high quality teachers in its city schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Haberman, 2000; Schaffer, 2011; Tidwell & Thompson, 2008). One way to support teacher candidates as they participate in field experiences is by placing them in Professional Development Schools (PDS) in high-needs districts (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008). According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2012):

Professional Development Schools are innovative institutions formed through partnerships between colleges of schools of education and P-12 schools. Their mission is professional preparation of teacher candidates, faculty development, inquiry directed at the improvement of practice, and enhanced student learning.

There are many advantages to placing teacher candidates in a PDS, including on-site support and collaborative practice (Taymans et al, 2012). This support and collaboration is valuable since in preparing pre-service teacher candidates for field experience, there are a number of factors that must be considered and addressed by teacher educators. In particular,

teacher educators must help teacher candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to foster high achievement among their own learners. This preparation is particularly important for candidates who are placed in urban school settings for practicum experiences.

Pre-service teachers and the general public have many misconceptions about urban schools. These misconceptions may affect teacher candidates, their performance in the urban classroom, and their decisions about seeking employment in urban school settings at a later date. The current study reports on the perceptions teacher candidates hold before participating in field work in an urban PDS, the ways in which those perceptions change throughout their teaching practice experience, and the factors that influence those changes. In addition, the study offers insights into teacher candidates' senses of preparedness for the urban setting and offers suggestions for changes in teacher education programs.

A Review of the Literature

Candidate Preconceptions

Candidates enter teacher education programs with established beliefs about diversity and urban education. Direct experiences are needed in order to mold and shape these well-established belief systems (Burbank, Ramirez, & Bates, 2012; Gilbert, 1997; Leonard, Barnes-Johnson, Dantley, & Kimber, 2011). These belief systems impact decisions that teacher candidates make both now and in the future. Providing opportunities for candidates to spend quality time in an urban PDS setting with the support and guidance of university professors and highly qualified teachers and administrators can ultimately mold and

shape their perceptions in a positive manner. This study shows how candidates' perceptions changed over the course of a semester after having been placed in an urban PDS environment.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Positive pre-service teacher training and education along with a positive clinical practice experience have been shown to lead toward positive pre-service teacher self-efficacy (Tuchman & Isaacs, 2011). Self-efficacy is the sense one has of perceptions regarding their own abilities and competence. The success, or lack of success, during pre-service teachers' field experiences can impact their self-efficacy and their future roles as teachers. Ruble, Usher, and McGrew (2011) state that a teacher's self-efficacy provides motivation and incentive to press on even when situations present severe challenges. They define self-efficacy as "beliefs teachers hold regarding their capability to bring about desired instructional outcomes..." (Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011, p. 67).

Research has shown that when a teacher has a successful and positive classroom experience involving classroom management and student interaction, they tend to have greater self-efficacy in relationship to their teaching (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). On the contrary, teachers who struggle with discipline, classroom management, and development of the learning community within the classroom tend to have greater job-related stress and lower job satisfaction. Teachers who display high self-efficacy also tend to experience higher student achievement, use improved instructional methods, and have an overall more successful performance than those with a lower sense of self-efficacy (Haverback & Parault, 2011). The level of self-efficacy that a pre-service teacher or veteran teacher has can directly impact their professional effectiveness in the future.

Preparing High Quality Teachers

Preparing pre-service teachers to teach in urban centers is often challenging (McKinney et al, 2008; Barnes, 2006). The majority of pre-service teacher candidates across the United States are white females from middle-class families with very limited experiences in culturally diverse urban settings (Swartz, 2003). Teacher education programs must continue focus on how to prepare these middle class candidates to become highly qualified teachers in both suburban and urban settings alike. A highly qualified teacher in an urban setting requires proficiency with culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2000). Teachers need to know and understand the contextual factors of the environment in which they work. Becoming familiar with the community, district, and school where one teaches is vital to building a foundation for teaching. According to Barnes (2006),

[t]he objective is to prepare future teachers to integrate content in a culturally responsive way by focusing on academic achievement, cultural competence and socio-

political consciousness. It is essential that pre-service teachers understand their role in the global education system by learning to create successful opportunities for all learners. (p. 93)

The role of teacher education programs is not only to prepare candidates to impart knowledge and content to students, but to also develop learning communities where students feel accepted, valued, and secure (Putnam & Burke, 2005). One key to preparing quality candidates for successful teaching in culturally diverse schools is to help them understand the contexts in which they teach. Cooper, Levin and He (2011) state,

[w]ith the increasing complexity of student diversity, knowledge about the different facets of diversity is not enough for teachers and administrators to implement meaningful strategies in their daily work with diverse students. Furthermore, all elements of culture intersect with one another to create an environment where individuals' multifaceted identities emerge. As a result, student diversity is becoming increasingly complex. (p. 3)

Complete immersion in diverse urban settings where teacher candidates have the opportunity to develop relationships with their diverse students is optimal. It is the goal of teacher education programs to develop the cultural competence of candidates through quality instruction as well as via rich field experiences in diverse environments.

Professional Development Schools

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) provides the following definition of a Professional Development School: "Professional Development Schools (PDS) are innovative institutions formed through partnerships between university teacher education programs and P-12 schools. Their mission is professional preparation of teacher candidates, faculty development, inquiry directed at the improvement of practice, and enhanced student learning" (NCATE, 2012). The ultimate goals of the PDS relationship are to improve teacher quality and to increase student achievement. Placing pre-service teachers in PDSs provides them with additional mentorship and support that they would not necessarily have in a traditional placement. PDSs have a university faculty member on-site known as a Professor In Residence (PIR) who works regularly with teachers, pre-service teachers, and administrators in order to help improve student achievement. PDSs are typically high-needs schools where both poverty and student achievement are major issues of concern.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on a constructivist approach to progressive education, this study emphasizes meaningful and active engagement for

teacher candidates through direct involvement and experiences in high-needs schools and urban settings. “In constructivism the learner is the key player, learners participate in generating meaning or understanding” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 110). Through direct participation and engagement in the learning, the learner forms meaning. Field experiences are crucial to teacher development, and such experiences can allow candidates to displace any preconceived and inaccurate perceptions about PK-12 students and their roles as teachers and replace them with more accurate ones.

Method

The focus of this article is a qualitative study grounded in a phenomenological approach examining teacher candidates’ preconceived perceptions of urban education before, during, and after being placed in an urban PDS. The focus was placed on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of pre-service teacher candidates while in their urban field experiences. While the school setting was similar for all participants, each one had their own personal perceptions and responded differently to the impetus. Creswell (2003), Hodder (1994) and Tjora (2006) report that phenomenological studies require multiple data sources, therefore, surveys, informal interviews, participant observations, and small focus groups were used to glean data. The study was conducted over the course of two years (four semesters) and involved three different urban Professional Development Schools. This author was a Professor in Residence (PIR) within one of the PDS schools in which the study was conducted. The research question explored for this study was “How do the attitudes and perceptions of pre-service teachers change as candidates complete their field experiences in high needs schools?”

PDS Schools

The PDS that served as the base during the first year of the study was a K-5 school located in an urban center in the northeast part of the United States. The city’s population is an estimated 78 thousand people with the average income being in the bottom quartile as compared to the state average and a commensurate high poverty rate. This school had partnered with the university as a PDS for several years.

The additional two PDS schools utilized in the study were K-8 schools that were within the same urban school district in the state, located only a few miles apart. The city’s population is an estimated 27 thousand with the average income being less than half of the state average, also resulting in a high poverty rate. This author served as the PIR in one of these schools during the second year of the study.

Both of these schools were in year one of the university PDS partnership when the study was conducted. All three PDS sites used were considered high-needs schools facing such challenges as high poverty rates, learning how to serve large numbers of

English Language Learners, and extremely low student performance on the state’s standardized tests.

Participants

The participants included five undergraduate elementary education teacher candidates who conducted their semester-long clinical practice experience in the PDS, and seven graduate level candidates from the university’s Master of Science in Teaching (MST) program who completed a year-long residency in the PDS. Participants also included 26 beginning teacher education candidates in their first education course, which included a 21-hour practicum experience in an elementary classroom. This practicum experience was completed in an urban PDS. Out of all the 38 total participants, all but four were female.

The author and a colleague, both college professors who served in a variety of ways with the participants, conducted the research. The two professors directly supervised some of the teacher candidates during their clinical practice experience at the PDS site where they also served as the university liaison or Professor-in-Residence (PIR). Some teacher candidates’ participated within a professional learning community led by the PIR within the PDS, and the second professor, as their course facilitator within the PDS, directly supervised the remaining 26 beginning teacher candidates. Through their work as supervisor and their weekly presence in the school as the PIR, the researchers had frequent interaction with the teacher candidates. Data was collected through pre and post open response surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and candidate self-reflective journal entries. In analyzing the multiple data sets, the researchers relied on inductive reasoning to identify emerging themes.

The PDS provides candidates a unique opportunity within their field placement with the continual support and access to the PIR. The PIR offers regular communication with candidates, assistance with lesson planning, instructional strategies, classroom management and behavior supports, and a shoulder to lean on. Bi-monthly the PIR would host brown bag lunch seminars where all the candidates in the PDS building would come together for group discussions and support. The focus groups for this research project were conducted during these brown bag lunches. The regular presence of the PIR as well as multiple candidates within the school provided a unique professional learning community that did not exist for candidates placed in traditional field placement settings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple sources of data were collected during this qualitative study where the results were analyzed and coded to refine categories, identify emerging concepts, and finally identifying common themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A triangulation approach was used to collect data. The first data source was the pre and post-survey. The survey questions were drafted and

Table 1. Pre and Post-survey Questions

1 Describe your feelings about teaching in a metro-rural/urban setting.
2 What are you excited about regarding your clinical practice placement?
3 What are you concerned about regarding your placement?
4 What contextual factors do you know about your school/district?
5 What predictions would you make about your students?
a. Do they like school?
b. Do they want to learn?
c. What types of behavior issues do you anticipate?
6 What issues do you anticipate your students deal with outside of school?
7 What expectations do you have for your district/school regarding technology and resources?
8 What expectations do you have regarding your relationship with your cooperating teacher?
9 What do you hope to gain from your clinical practice experience in an urban setting?
10 Do you anticipate pursuing a job in an urban setting once you graduate? Why or why not?
a. Would it be your first, middle, or last choice in job hunting?
11 What benefits/disadvantages do you see for completing clinical practice in an urban setting?
12 Who do you anticipate you will be able to go to for help/advice/assistance/resources during your clinical practice experience?

presented to a preliminary group of pre-service teachers as a way to receive feedback and ensure clarity and validity of the survey instrument (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). The survey questions can be seen in Table 1.

The pre-survey was administered to all participants prior to their first visit in the field placement as a way to gather their preconceived ideas regarding urban classrooms. The post-survey was administered on or after their final day in their field placement. The open-ended responses were categorized and coded for common themes after each administration.

A second data source involved informal interviews of some of the candidates involved in clinical practice. Around the midpoint of their clinical practice experience, candidates were asked to respond to a sequence of questions in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The interview questions asked candidates about their initial thoughts and feelings regarding their urban placements, and how, if at all, those initial feelings changed after spending several weeks in the urban classroom. All interviews were recorded using an iPad and later transcribed. Candidates were then able to review the transcriptions for accuracy.

A third source of data came from small focus group interviews with the clinical practice candidates. The questions used in the focus groups were similar to the interview with a few different ones, but were conducted after the one-on-one interviews. In the focus groups, candidates were able to respond

Table 2. Candidate Anticipated Feelings and Perceptions

Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
Question & Responses	% of candidate responses	Question & Responses	% of candidate responses
Question 1		Question 1	
Positive	68%	Positive	93%
Negative	32	Negative	7
Question 3		Question 3	
Behavior management	32	Behavior management	32
Safety	10	Safety	25
Question 9		Question 9	
Classroom management	66	Classroom management	61
		Urban experience	29
Question 10		Question 10	
Yes	57	Yes	59
No	17	No	13
Maybe	26	Maybe	28
Question 10a		Question 10a	
First	59	First	53
Middle	17	Middle	37
Last	24	Last	10
		Question 13	
		Positive experience	100

to one another, compare answers, and share their feelings regarding their placements. The focus group discussions were also recorded using an iPad and later transcribed.

The final source of data came from the 26 beginning teacher candidates' reflective journal responses as part of their 21-hour practicum experience. These candidates spent three hours a week for seven weeks in the urban PDS elementary classroom as part of their first education course. Weekly reflections were assigned and collected by the course professor, the second researcher. These weekly reflections were analyzed and coded to refine categories, identify emerging concepts, and finally common themes.

Findings

The pre- and post-survey used in this study consisted of thirteen open-ended questions pertaining to the candidates' perceptions of urban education (see Table 1). Not all candidates answered every question, and they often recorded multiple answers for different questions. For interpretation, the survey questions were divided into three different categories based on the question content. The three categories were 1) candidates' anticipated feelings and perceptions, 2) candidates' expectations and 3) candidates' perception and knowledge of contextual factors and student backgrounds. The first category focuses on candidates' preconceived notions of urban classrooms and how they felt

Table 3. Candidate Expectations

Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
Question & Responses	% of candidate responses	Question & Responses	% of candidate responses
Question 2		Question 2	
Good opportunity	44	Working w/children	82
Teaching/instructional methods	36		
Working w/children	21		
Question 8		Question 8	
Good relationship	100	Good relationship	93
		Not so great	7
Question 11 Benefits		Question 11 Benefits	
Classroom management	84	Classroom management	21
Exposure to urban setting	19	Exposure to urban setting	46

about conducting their field experiences in this setting. Table 2 displays candidates' responses to the first category questions on both the pre- and post-survey.

Question one asked how candidates felt about teaching in an urban setting. 68% of the candidates responded positively and 32% responded negatively to that question. After being immersed in the school culture for a semester, there was an increase in positive responses at the end with 93% responding positively and only 7% responding negatively. Survey question number three asked candidates what their concerns were regarding their placements. The candidates' responses to this question remained consistent from the pre-survey to the post-survey with 32% of candidates expressing concern regarding their ability to manage student behavior. Interestingly, personal safety concerns increased during the semester with only 10% expressing concern on the pre-survey and 25% expressing concern on the post-survey.

Responses to question nine also remained consistent with candidates' valuing and appreciating the opportunity of gaining experience in an urban setting as well as observation of good classroom management techniques. There was consistency in candidate responses to question ten from pre to post regarding their desire to seek a position teaching in an urban classroom. 57% indicated positive interest on the pre-survey and 59% on the post-survey. Question 10a asked candidates if teaching in an urban setting would be a first, middle, or last choice, and their responses were consistent with 59% and 53% responding with first choice respectively. One difference did surface with regards to last choice indication however. On the pre-survey, 24% of candidates indicated that an urban setting would be their last choice for employment and that number reduced to only 10% on the post-survey. This might indicate that teaching in an urban

setting would be less intimidating than it previously was as a result of this field experience.

The second category for interpretation of the survey results was candidates' expectations as seen in Table 3.

On the pre-survey, candidates had a variety of answers for question 2 about what they were excited about in their placements, with 44% stating it was a good opportunity, 36% stating observing instructional methods, and 21% stating working with children. On the post-survey there was an overwhelming response where the majority (82%) stated working with children. Question eight asked candidates about their anticipated relationship with their cooperating teacher. 100% answered positively on the pre-survey, but only 93% stated that they had a positive relationship on the post-survey.

Question eleven asked candidates what the benefits and disadvantages they anticipated within an urban placement. On the pre-survey 84% of candidates responded with learning classroom management techniques as a benefit, whereas only 21% mentioned this on the post-survey. Another benefit that was mentioned was the exposure to urban settings, which 19% stated accordingly on the pre-survey and 46% on the post-survey. This could indicate that candidate's concern regarding classroom management was significantly reduced as a result of the urban experience and also that they valued it.

The third category for interpretation of the survey results was the candidates' perception and knowledge of contextual factors and student background as seen in Table 4.

Question four asked candidates about what contextual factors the candidates had previous knowledge of with 70% stating high levels of poverty and 30% stating high numbers of minority children on the pre-survey. Interestingly these numbers reversed on the post-survey with 61% stating poverty and 39% stating minority populations. Question five asked candidates if they believed that the children liked school and on the pre-survey 52% responded yes and 67% confirmed this on the post-survey as well.

One question that remained fairly consistent from pre-survey to post regarded candidates' anticipated behavior issues with 71% expecting aggressive and disruptive behavior by students to 61% highlighting aggression at the end of the experience. On the post-survey, 29% of candidates also added that they saw physical altercations occur between students during their experience. Another perception that played out was candidates' expectation of finding large numbers of nontraditional families and poverty, with 100% of candidates commenting along these lines on both the pre and post-surveys. On the pre-survey, candidates gave a wide range of responses to the question regarding perceptions of available technology in the school, from SMART boards, to either outdated technology, or lack of technological resources altogether. On the post-survey 83% of candidates stated that there were more technological resources within the school than they had expected, and 17% stated that there was less than expected.

Table 4. Candidates' Perception and Knowledge of Contextual Factors and Student Backgrounds

Pre-survey		Post-survey	
Question & Responses	% of candidate responses	Question & Responses	% of candidate responses
Question 4		Question 4	
Poverty	30	Poverty	61
Minority population	70	Minority population	39
Question 5a		Question 5a	
Yes	71	Yes	69
No	14	No	0
Some	14	Some	31
Question 5b		Question 5b	
Yes	52	Yes	67
No	14	No	3
Some	34	Some	30
Question 5c		Question 5c	
Aggressive/disruptive	71	Aggressive/disruptive	61
		Physical altercations	29
Question 6		Question 6	
Nontraditional homes	100	Nontraditional homes	100
Poverty	100	Poverty	100
Question 7		Question 7	
Outdated/lack of resources		More than expected	83
Available working technology SMART boards		Less than expected	17

The pre and post-survey provided great insight into some of the preconceptions that the teacher candidates had prior to their urban field experiences and how their perceptions may or may not have changed over the course of the semester in that field placement. Some perceptions held true, like the anticipation of high poverty rates and minority children, as well as aggressive and disruptive behavior. On the other hand, some of their preconceptions did not hold to be true, such as their feelings about future teaching in urban settings, which increased greatly according to question one. At the end of the urban field experience, 100% of candidates stated that they had a positive experience.

The second source of data collected for this study came from five one-on-one interviews with a few of the clinical practice candidates' midway through the semester. All five of these candidates stated that they were somewhat excited about their placement for clinical practice in an urban setting, but that at the same time they felt nervous and reserved. When asked if these reservations subsided upon time spent in the school and

classroom, one said yes and four stated that they no longer feel the reservation they felt previously, but they realized that the experience was going to be challenging nonetheless. When asked about what had surprised them so far in their urban experience, one candidate stated how she was surprised by her 3rd graders' desire to learn and their positive response to teacher praise and encouragement. Another candidate, on the contrary to that, remarked about her 8th grade students,

I was naive about the students from the get go, as far as I'm concerned with how I see them now. There are many students who have little respect for any educator or adult in general, and there are just as many students who see school as a waste of time. Those students are the ones whose skills are suffering greatly. I am surprised at how much time is taken during the class time for classroom management due to the behavior of certain children; it is almost always the same students who cause disruptions, and yet they still remain with the general population, taking away from instructional time. Home suspensions do not seem to assuage their behavioral difficulties.

When asked about whether or not any of their prior perceptions were correct or substantiated, two of the candidates stated that about 75% of their prior perceptions were substantiated in their urban experience, and the other three candidates stated that only about half of their perceptions were substantiated and were what they expected. The first two mentioned that the experience was about what they had expected regarding children's aggressive behavior and disruptions in the classroom. The later three candidates' responded that only about half of their perceptions were realized and that their classrooms were much better managed than they had anticipated. It is important to note here that the first two candidates were placed in middle school (grades 6-8) classrooms, and the later three more positive responding candidates were placed in elementary classrooms (grades K-5). When asked if they could see themselves accepting a full time teaching position in a similar setting, four out of the five stated yes. One candidate responded,

I would accept a full-time teaching position in this setting in a heartbeat; I have become personally invested in this school due to my time spent here during my placement. As for similar settings, it would depend on the safety of the neighborhood simply due to concern for my personal safety.

The candidate who responded 'no' stated that although she valued this opportunity to teach in a high-needs school, she preferred to teach in a school similar to what she grew up in, a suburban school. These five candidates shared in their one-on-one interviews some of their preconceptions that were accurate and what they expected to find, as well as some of their

misconceptions, or things that they did not find as they had anticipated.

The third data source collected for this study was two different small focus groups conducted with four clinical practice candidates in each, twelve weeks into a fifteen week semester. The majority of questions for the focus groups were similar to the interview queries. The group session allowed the teacher candidates to share personal experiences and interact with one another. Most of the candidates expressed that they were excited about their urban placements, but that they had been nervous and had reservations at the start. One candidate exclaimed, "Nervous, but excited! – I thought that it would be a good experience and a great place to learn classroom management! – Thought that if I can handle that school, I can handle anything!" Another stated that she was more intimidated with her 5th grade placement because she would have preferred a primary classroom. Yet another candidate stated that they were, "Scared at first, but now I love it!"

The question about one expectation they had prior to their first day that held to be true resulted in a variety of answers. One candidate stated that she expected students to be disrespectful and abrasive, and while some of them were, the majority were not. Another said she expected high levels of poverty, which was the case. Another expected low academic abilities, and this too was true. One stated, "I was hopeful and excited, expected to love it, and I do!"

On the contrary, the candidates were asked about one expectation they had prior to their first day that they later discovered to be false. One candidate replied, "I expected the classroom management to really be a challenge. My cooperating teacher has great management skills and her classroom is very calm and structured." Another stated that she expected very little technology; however the school had fairly good technological resources. Yet another candidate responded that, "I expected there to be very little parental support, but we had near perfect attendance at the parent-teacher conferences." One candidate believed that she saw academically stronger kids than she expected after looking at the school's overall low test scores. A good portion of the students were at low achievement levels, but not all as she had anticipated.

One last highlight of the focus groups was teacher candidates' responses to the question regarding what surprised them most about their placement/environment. Common responses were "How much I like it!" and "How much I enjoy it!" Another candidate stated, "My ability to connect with my students! I will really miss them when I leave!" Yet another candidate commented, "The physical altercations between students; they do not hesitate to fight, and for some it is their first response." The eight teacher candidates involved in these two different focus groups were placed in two PDS K-8 schools only a few miles apart. In both instances the candidates seemed to enjoy the time to sit down together and share their

experiences with each other. They were very chatty and all attitudes were positive and uplifting.

The final data source collected for this study was an analysis of the practicum students' self-reflection journal entries. Reviewing candidates' reflective writings over the course of the semester resulted in some interesting revelations. Some of the things mentioned by candidates after their first visit was their surprise in finding a police officer on campus, as well as the physical altercations between students as young as kindergarten. Other surprises involved the SMART boards in classrooms, school uniforms, and the extent of the poverty present.

At the end of week four of a seven week experience, candidates' comments tended to be more positive in nature. Some of these comments mentioned the surprise in the healthy snacks offered to the children and that they actually ate them. Another was amazed by the teacher's ability to manage the classroom with large amounts of instruction going on. One teacher candidate expressed how s/he was "impressed by the teacher's care and concern for the students and [how] she makes learning fun for them." In addition, some negative responses were also recorded, such as a teacher who had no classroom management skills and yelled a lot, some defiant student behavior, and large differences in student ability levels.

During the sixth week of the practicum experience, teacher candidates wrote about both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Some of the positive statements described the connections candidates were able to make with the students, their ability to get more involved in the classroom instruction, and how valuable it was for them to observe excellent classroom management and behavior management strategies from their mentor teachers. The negative responses focused more on a few challenging students with severe behavioral issues as well as one candidate who had what they felt was an ineffective mentor teacher.

Across the six week practicum experience, these sophomore teacher candidates displayed growth and maturity in their weekly written reflections of their experiences in a high-needs school. One particular overall insight the researcher discovered via the document analysis of candidates' reflections was how they were really able to connect and relate to their young students over time. Through this practicum field experience most candidates were able to become a part of the classroom culture, and as a result, peered through a different "lens" towards the end as they were able to identify the impact that poverty and other urban issues have on young children.

Discussion

With these findings I hope to help urban teacher educators, researchers, and members of the PDS community move forward and engage in discourse about the value of placing pre-service teachers in urban PDS settings for field experiences. Specifically, these findings might provide insight into potential changes in teacher education programs that could foster better under-

standing of the urban classroom and promote the ideal that all children can learn. For the most part, the majority of the teacher candidates, at various levels in their programs, had positive attitudes towards a field placement in an urban setting, even though they had some reservations. Many of the candidates expressed feelings of optimism and looked at the experience as an opportunity to learn from what they felt may be a challenging setting. Most of these candidates realized the benefits of an urban experience and embraced whatever challenges it brought.

One key underlying theme was the connection that these teacher candidates made to the students. In the beginning they expressed nervousness and fear of the unknown, as well as many preconceptions, some accurate and others inaccurate, of what awaited them in a high-needs K-8 classroom. The longer they were in their placements, however, the more their comments and reflections turned to the children and the learning environment. Once connected to the culture of the classroom, they began to see past the issues and challenges of urban teaching to see the needs, wants, and desires of the children. Once these connections are made, teacher candidates no longer just focused on teaching a curriculum, but rather meeting the needs of each and every child in the classroom. That is what building a learning community and developing cultural competence is all about and that is why it is emphasized in teacher preparation programs (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011). When elementary teachers have the ability to create a learning community within their classrooms, children gain a sense of belonging and feel a sense of safety in sharing their thoughts and opinions (Poulou, 2009; Putnam & Burke, 2005). This in turn provides students with the optimal learning environment where mutual respect and personal feelings of value exist.

So much emphasis in education today is on standardized test scores and academic achievement. Even the latest teacher evaluation methods place a great deal of emphasis on student achievement to measure teacher success. Teacher educators must help prepare teacher candidates to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to develop academic achievement, social responsibility, and personal responsibility for their students so that they in turn can foster high achievement among their diverse learners. This preparation is particularly important for pre-service teachers because they often have misconceptions about the urban setting that may affect their performance in the urban classroom, and their decision on whether to seek employment in high-needs school settings at a later date. Providing urban experiences for teacher candidates allows them the opportunity to engage in the classroom culture and display any unmerited preconceptions they may have. Observing the best urban educators in action, who model best practices in classroom management, discipline, authentic instruction, and learning community development, is a vital element of effective teacher preparation. ^{SUP}

Appendix

Interview & Focus Group Questionnaire

- 1 When you first found out about your clinical practice placement, what were your immediate thoughts, feelings, and reservations?
 - 2 During the first week of your experience, did those feelings, intensify, calm, or stay the same? Why?
 - 3 How have your perceptions/feelings regarding the school/district changed since you first arrived?
 - 4 How have your perceptions/feelings regarding the students changed since you first arrived?
 - 5 What has surprised you the most so far in your experience regarding the school, students, or community?
 - 6 Looking back, did you have any "misconceptions" regarding the school, students, or community?
 - 7 Looking back, were any of your perceptions correct and substantiated?
 - 8 What do you value most about your clinical practice placement?
 - 9 What struggles do you have with your clinical practice placement?
 - 10 Could you see yourself accepting a full-time teaching position in this setting or a similar setting?
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