NEW TEACHERS FOR CHANGE:
CONSIDERING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRE-SERVICE URBAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

This study presents the perspectives of a group of pre-service teacher candidates with a commitment to teach in urban public schools. Nineteen new teachers participated in this study and 14 of them identified as new teachers of Color. Their reflections on entering the teaching profession, teaching in urban schools, and qualities of good teaching are presented to showcase their power, creativity, and focus to bring about change in public education through effective teaching and attention to community organizing. Results are presented to show the importance of listening to teachers' voices in the scholarly pursuit of social justice education and the critique of proposed federal regulations that attempt to standardize the evaluation of teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: urban education, pre-service teachers, teachers of Color, social justice

Given the proposed federal regulations for teacher preparation programs across the United States (U. S. Department of Education, 2015), it is clear that the era of standardization and testing in public education is gaining force. In fact, the Department of Education is pursuing an evaluation system that not only rates teachers based on their K-12 students' state-mandated standardized test scores, but now will rate the teacher preparation program each teacher attended based on these scores. While the lack of empirical and theoretical research to support such an approach is well documented (e.g. Kumashiro, 2015), it appears that pre-determined, standardized outcomes will continue to infiltrate the evaluation of teacher preparation programs (Dover, Schultz, Smith, & Duggan, 2015). As policy makers, teacher educators, and educational researchers weigh in on the importance of and problems with the standardization of teacher preparation, the voices of actual classroom teachers are missing.

The absence of teachers' perspectives not only showcases the bureaucratic distancing of policy from actual K-12 classrooms, but it represents the silencing effect of pre-determined academic outcomes that fail to account for the cultural and contextual factors of education that lie at the heart of meaningful learning (e.g. Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011). While teachers—and particularly teachers of Color in urban schools— are excluded from the debate, their work with youth is front and center in the Department of Education's proposed regulations. Specifically, there is a claimed focus on programs that support teachers to work in "low-income" schools in "states with eligibility for TEACH grants" (U. S. Department of Education, 2015). Thus, new

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urban teachers are directly implicated in this proposed policy, and their voices need to be heard. The current study attempts to include the voices of a diverse group of new urban teachers through presenting their perspectives on and reasons for entering the profession. The research questions guiding this inquiry of new teachers are: Why do you want to be a teacher? Why do you want to teach in urban schools? What makes a good teacher?

Theoretical Foundations: Teaching for Equity and Access in Urban Schools

The proposed federal regulations for teacher preparation discussed above are reflective of a larger agenda in public education today—the commodification of teaching and learning. As educational researchers with a focus on urban schools, we must work in solidarity with students, teachers, families, and communities to disrupt the narrative in our country that blames communities of color for the supposed "failure" of urban public schools (e.g. Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 2002). This narrative reflects a short sighted belief in culturally biased standardized testing procedures (e.g. Hilliard, 1984; 1995; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) while also neglecting to acknowledge nearly half a century of empirical research on the structural complexities and inequities in public schools (e.g. Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Rist, 1970). One way to counter this narrative is to build upon existing scholarship with youth, teachers, and communities of Color to portray cultural strengths and successes (e.g. Yosso, 2005). This is important for students and teachers alike, as their voices are too often lacking in the political, legislative, and scholarly discourse in education.

New Teachers in Urban Schools: An Asset Approach

Attempting to portray the assets of a community is not as simple as having a positive outlook or seeing potential in a given context. It involves methodical, sophisticated, and relational understandings of the cultural values, traditions, behaviors, and knowledges of communities. Research on funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992), developmental assets (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blythe, 1998), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and cultural assets (Borrero, 2011) help to frame the theoretical approach of the current study. Namely, new teachers entering a teacher preparation program with a focus on urban schools need to develop an understanding of their students' (and their students' communities) cultural assets. Part of doing so requires a true commitment to teaching in schools that have historically lacked resources (Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

As teacher educators, we must model this approach to cultural assets through the active recruitment and support of working class pre-service teachers of Color into the profession (Kohli, 2012) and attempt to build programs that foster their cultural assets as new teachers. This work is purposeful, historically grounded, and essential for the future of the profession and the mentoring of K-12 students of color (Boutte & Jackson, 2013; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). From this stance, the current study is grounded in a theoretical tradition of transformative education in which teaching and learning co-exist in culturally relevant and responsive exchange (Camangian, 2010; Freire, 1970; Spring, 1990).

Valuing the Perspectives of New Teachers

Building on a theoretical approach to teaching and learning that values the cultural assets of teachers and their K-12 students, this study utilizes sociocultural (e.g. Nieto, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) and ecological (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1994) learning theories. Lived experiences—inside and outside of school—are vital to learning, and the navigation of multiple, diverse cultural contexts is a central facet of teaching in urban schools (Borrero & Yeh, 2010). For the current study, the lived experiences of pre-service teachers with a commitment to teaching in urban schools are seen as essential resources that will guide these new teachers in their vision for the teachers they want to become. In these ways, their perspectives about teaching—and why they want to teach in urban schools—are part of an ecological approach to teaching, teacher preparation, and educational research in which multiple, related, dynamic ecological systems inform pedagogy (Lee, 2008).

This ecological approach is not only important in its acknowledgement of and desire to foster the complex cultural identities of teachers as a part of building effective pedagogy, but it also provides a theoretical foundation to counter a standardized and formulaic approach to teaching and learning (e.g. Yosso, 2005). For example, the proposed federal regulations for the evaluation of teacher preparation programs rely on standardized test scores of K-12 students regardless of school or community context. At the same time, these regulations claim to be promoting an agenda for more highly qualified teachers in "low-income" schools. Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Lee, 2008) helps to provide a foundation to show that the data to be collected (test scores at school) do not match the desired outcome (more qualified teachers in "low-income" schools) because of a failure to recognize the complex and inter-dependent ecological systems impacting students and teachers in real life classrooms. Meaning, for example, a student's test scores at school (a part of a student's "microsystem") cannot be completely separated from her/his interactions with peers, communities, families, etc., ("mesosystem") and the larger sociopolitical ("macrosystem") and historical ("chronosystem") factors of these multiple contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Method

Given these theoretical foundations, participants in this study represent purposeful sampling (Galloway, 2005) of a group of pre-service teachers who were entering a teacher preparation program with a deliberate focus on urban education and social justice (see Borrero, Flores, & de la Cruz, 2016). Aligned with the asset-based, ecological approach to teaching and learning presented above, the program attempts to recruit and support working class candidates with experiences in urban schools. The program is a two-year combined Masters and certificate program and candidates complete their classroom observations and student teaching in urban public schools. Candidates enter the program as a cohort and travel through the course sequence together. For the current study, participants were 19 pre-service teachers that comprised the entirety of an entering cohort. Of the 19 participants, 15 identified as female, two identified as male, and two identified as queer. Five participants identified as Asian American, four as Latina/Latino, four as mixed race, one as African American, five as White, and the average age of participants was 25.6 years.

At the start of the orientation meeting to begin the program, participants completed a survey with demographic information and three open-ended questions: Why do you want to be a

teacher? Why do you want to teach in urban schools? What makes a good teacher? Candidates were given approximately twenty minutes to complete the survey. This survey was developed to create baseline information for each incoming cohort. For the current study, only responses to the three open-ended questions were analyzed, and foundations of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were employed for data analysis. Independently, the author and one research assistant (who was not involved in any aspect of data collection) read all of the surveys to get an overall sense of candidates' responses (Merriam, 1988). Then, the surveys were re-read independently and each reader began to underline units of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the form of recurring words and phrases. The identification of these units started a process of open coding in which all possible data were explored for potential themes. Next, the two readers met, compared codes, and began a discussion of possible themes to which the codes related (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The readers then read the surveys again independently and began to underline specific sentences that reflected the possible emergent themes that were identified. In a final meeting together, the readers shared chosen sentences and agreed upon emergent themes.

Results

The emergent themes presented below are organized under each of the research questions: Why do you want to be a teacher? Why do you want to teach in urban schools? What makes a good teacher?

Why do you want to be a teacher?

Emergent themes from candidates' perspectives about becoming teachers were: *to build community* and *to be part of a movement*.

To build community. Candidates shared that much of their interests in becoming teachers stemmed from their own experiences in schools and the mentors they had. This ranged from comments about parents and family members who were teachers to specific teachers that they had in specific grade levels. Candidates also expressed their desires to support students through teaching and mentorship. For example, Kim wrote, "I want to be a role model for others (youth and adult alike) and become a teacher who stands with students in their struggles in middle and high school." This sentiment of working alongside students through difficult times was expressed by multiple candidates, as they wrote about some of their own experiences as youth and the teachers who supported them.

Candidates also wrote about the process of choosing to become a teacher, and their reasons for doing so. Carmen wrote:

> I want to be a teacher for my community. In my community, oppression is a tool that controls people. I've seen this oppression in the classroom and I became frustrated with teachers and administrators. I've seen too many students lose faith in themselves. I want to be a teacher because I am tired…tired of what I see in the classroom and outside of it. To make a change, I decided it was time to get out of my comfort zone and take the step to becoming a teacher…for my students.

Candidates expressed wanting to become mentors for students who may not have other supports. Further, they wrote about building community with extended networks of people in support of students. Ellen wrote that she wanted to be a teacher "to stand in solidarity with my community, my students, and their families."

To be part of a movement. Related to the theme of building community through their teaching, candidates wrote about teaching to create change. As discussed above, this was in large part from their own experiences in K-12 schools and work in their local communities. This idea of teacher as change agent was expressed in different ways. Alma wrote that she wants to be a teacher "because education plays a huge role in social change," and Anna wrote, "I want to work with children with careful intention and purpose in a way that will rectify a lot of the injustices that pervade our shared worlds." In writing about change, and the inequities they want to confront as teachers, there was a commitment to justice as a part of teaching. Alex wrote, "I believe in the power of/potential for radical social justice. I believe that another world is possible. And I believe that education and critical thought are key elements to creating this sort of radical change." This political awareness was a part of candidates' vision for becoming teachers.

Further, the idea of bringing about change through teaching was expressed as community organizing and being part of a movement for more equitable schooling. Mia wrote, "I want to be a teacher because I believe education is an important place to build movements to change this system." Building on this idea, Val focused on her work with students in the classroom as a part of a larger movement to bring about change:

> I want to be a teacher who can bring transformative ideas to groups of students in hopes of building social consciousness for a better world…the education system can be both oppressive and liberating. My goal is to identify the oppressive traits along with my students and use education and a means for liberation.

Brian expressed his vision for becoming a teacher involving work both in the classroom and beyond: "To organize students and teachers to become changemakers. To fight for progressive policies to change the state of education. To be a bridge for organizations and people in the movement fighting for social justice, equity, and change." These examples showcase the urgency in candidates' responses and their belief in teaching as a political act.

Why do you want to teach in urban schools?

When candidates focused more specifically on their desires to teach in urban schools, two themes emerged: *to help change education in my community* and *to be a role model*.

To help change education in my community. As with the themes presented above, there was urgency in candidates' responses to bring about change through their teaching. More specifically, candidates wrote about their own experiences in urban schools and how teaching was a way for them to give back. Alec wrote: "I want to work in schools that are under-resourced like my own schools growing up…It needs to change and I want to be a part of it!!" Similarly, Rica expressed a sense of hope in thinking about the power and potential of the schools she attended and now plans to teach in: "urban schools gave me my education. They are challenging,

complex, uncomfortable, and this is where transformation in the education system will occur." Alex added to this idea by writing:

> I want to teach in urban schools because of my own experience within/without urban school systems. Because I believe urban schools are the sites of massive institutionalized oppression against communities of color. And as a teacher I want to disrupt that process to build with communities and turn the systems upside down and build new ones.

This sense of change was deeply rooted in students' experiences as K-12 students.

To be a role model. As with the examples above, candidates sought change through their teaching and possibilities for changing the schools and communities they grew up in. Maria wrote:

> I am a product of this district. As a student, I was labeled ELL…and I felt that teachers assumed and placed me there because of my color. I also feel that teachers place blame on children for being disruptive, loud, etc. instead of identifying the issue/problem and looking for solutions to serve the student. My goal as an educator in urban schools is to approach issues in the education system with an open mind and heart.

This response reflects her own experiences and her commitment to teach in the local district. This sentiment was also expressed by Brian: "The problematic elements in the urban community I grew up and live in have deep roots in our education system. Thus, in order for me to help manifest a healthy, more equitable community, I feel it is crucial that urban students have powerful insights and a sense of agency. I want to be a part of that." This quote shows an awareness of the historical legacy of inequitable educational opportunity in this community and a desire to be a leader for change.

What makes a good teacher?

Two emergent themes from candidates' perspectives about good teaching were: *being a life long learner* and *listening*.

Being a life long learner. Candidates' responses were generally shorter for this prompt. Many listed words or phrases of teacher qualities and some wrote short sentences. As with the themes above, candidates' responses reflected their own experiences as K-12 students and their desires to bring about change through teaching. Prominent among responses was a sense that a good teacher is always learning—not just about content, but about self and pedagogy. Laurie wrote that a good teacher is "someone who continues to grow and who constantly reflects on themselves and their teaching style." Carissa added to this idea of self-reflection by connecting it to students and the reciprocity of teaching. She wrote, a good teacher is "someone who understands they are as much the student as the student is the teacher." Again, the focus on bringing about change and community organizing was present in candidates' thoughts on this topic. Alma wrote about a good teacher as "someone who builds community with parents, other organizations, staff, and students. Someone who teaches students in a way that breaks down

oppressive barriers in our culture." This focus on community and equity was present across all three research questions.

Listening. To expand upon candidates' attention to community building as a part of good teaching, there was a strong focus on the importance of listening and believing in every student. Arian wrote, "A good teacher is one that does not stop learning and listening to others." Further, Robin wrote that a good teacher has "flexibility in pedagogy, respect for and belief in every student's ability to learn." Again, the importance of self-reflection was a part of candidates' responses as Alec wrote about "a willingness to step back, listen, and learn." The importance of community building was also present in these responses. For example, Carmen wrote that a good teacher is, "a person who builds relationships with everyone in the community: teachers, students, parents, etc. Most importantly, I feel that a good teacher understands why they are doing their work the way they do." The purposeful, asset-based responses reflect candidates' desires to make classrooms equitable spaces for all students.

Discussion

The themes presented above—*to build community*, *to be part of a movement*, *to help change education in my community*, *to be a role model*, *being a life long learner*, and *listening*— reflect this group of pre-service teachers' perspectives on urban teaching as they begin their first day of classes in a teacher preparation program. Collectively, these themes show that this group of teachers is committed to something new in urban schools—they are committed to change. This change is articulated through their writing about their own experiences as K-12 students and their purposeful desire to teach in urban schools that have been historically under resourced.

Implications and Conclusions

These teachers' perspectives are important and must be part of the national discussion about teacher preparation and evaluation. In the context of the current study, it is necessary to note the limitations and possibilities for this research. Regarding the limitations of this study, this is a small sample of new teachers in a specific teacher preparation context in California. Results are not generalizable. Further, the reported perspectives of this group of teachers are limited to their responses on an in-class survey at the very start of the program. Thus, they represent a snap shot in time for these candidates. Their predisposition to issues of equity in urban schools is seen in their quotes and their perspectives are not meant to be representative of other new teachers in different contexts. It is also important to note that the program these students are entering is in continual development and improvement and is not presented as a model.

Given these limitations, these new teachers' words are powerful. They reveal a deep and authentic commitment to making a difference in the lives of urban students—something that all of us in the field need to honor. In this era of high stakes testing and standardization, and given the framing of this study within the proposed federal regulations for teacher preparation (U. S. Department of Education, 2015), these teachers' perspectives offer new possibilities for the future of our urban schools and how we assess students. These teachers did not enter the profession to administer state mandated tests or to move their students from "below basic" to "basic" on pre-determined outcomes. They want to teach to change lives (Camangian, 2010) and

be part of an educational era that provides equitable access to quality education for all students—especially those in urban public schools.

As researchers, we have a lot to learn from these new teachers (Kohli, 2012). They are critical, socially conscious, and hopeful for a teaching career in which they continually learn from and stand beside students, families, and communities. To honor their experiences and perspectives, we must listen to them. Providing opportunities for dialogue and community-building within teacher preparation programs is vital to fostering change in the system (e.g. Borrero et al., 2016; Villegas et al., 2012). We also have to develop strategies within teacher education that give candidates opportunities to connect their lived experiences with pedagogical and curricular development for K-12 schools (e.g. Camangian, 2010). Further, we must include the voices of new teachers in our research and we must develop teacher preparation programs that not only support new teachers like these to achieve their goals, but also provide them access to research experiences during their teacher education so that their voices and experiences are a part of the scholarly and political movement for equitable, transformative education in this country (Lipman, 2011; Yosso, 2005). They are the future leaders of this movement and we cannot let pre-determined, static measures of success determine where they will lead us.

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