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STUDENTS AND TEACHERS CO-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

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Abstract

This paper examines how pre-service teachers were able to explore their own beliefs and build meaningful relationships with elementary school students in an after-school context. After school programs provide an opportunity for teachers and students to get to know one another in a way that is not typically possible during the regular school day. Through observations and review of pre-service teacher journals, insights about the value of after-school programs as a sight for self-appraisal, challenging biases, and confirming (or reconsidering) the choice to become a teacher are revealed. Results suggest that combining the after-school practicum experience with selective readings and class discussions allowed pre-service teachers to take a critical look at their choice to become a teacher and their disposition toward typically marginalized children and schools.

Keywords: *teacher identity, urban education, teacher bias, after-school programs*

Given that the teaching force has become increasingly White, female, and middle class while concurrently the student population has a growing representation of children of color in under-resourced urban communities, teacher education programs and accreditation bodies (e.g., formerly the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, which is now known as CAEP – Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) have placed greater emphasis on diversity and working with diverse student populations. As this trend is unlikely to change, we argue that both pre-service teachers and students benefit from having a designated safe space for identity exploration. In particular, teachers need to explore their beliefs and preconceptions about diverse student populations. After-school programs are uniquely suited for this kind of exploration. After-school programs provide an opportunity for teachers and students to get to know one another in a way that is not typically possible during the regular school day. Additionally, while there is often academic work happening—often in the form of homework help—it is a more of a low stakes environment than the typical classroom. Thus, schools in general, and after school programs in particular represent a rich opportunity to strategically

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engage emerging adults (teachers) and youth (students) around multiple aspects of identity development. The purpose of this paper is to examine how after-school programs can be used as strategic social spaces to positively shape pre-service teacher and student identities. This article highlights outcomes from two urban after school tutoring programs that were staffed by pre-service teachers.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed using an ecological systems perspective. We applied the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory [PVEST] (Spencer, 1995) as a way to capture the dynamic interactive processes that exist between and among teachers and students. PVEST is a process oriented identity development model comprised of five components and provides a way to specifically consider context from the perspective of the teacher. More specifically, Spencer's PVEST (1995) helps to explain the dynamic bi-directional influences between teachers' self-appraisal processes and risks and the way they cope and form identities. Additionally, PVEST provides an identity-focused cultural ecological (ICE) perspective that effectively and explicitly links thinking about identity and context. PVEST is presented with five components; net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities, and life stage outcomes. In this study, the component of vulnerability is particularly relevant for both the teachers and the students with whom they work. In the case of students from low SES or urban contexts net vulnerability consists of an often culturally incongruent pedagogy, low expectations, an over focus on testing and mistrust in schools and teachers. And, from the teachers' perspective vulnerability exists because many of them have had a mono-cultural education and privilege that has led to a lack of self-reflection. For many teachers, what some may see as a privileged existence could actually be a detriment to their ability to teach all children. PVEST challenges us to see the bidirectional influences of this vulnerability and attempt to reframe how we view the *other*. According to PVEST, teachers and students serve as bidirectional influences (contexts) one to another. Through teachers' expectation students are not only informed about who they are currently but also about their maturational prospects in the future.

Similarly, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) determine that identity is dynamic and ever changing. As, a dynamic process, identity development is influenced by experiences. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) consider the personal and professional aspects of identity as multidimensional, including; *how to be, how to act, and how to understand*. With each experience that students and teachers encounter, they have the potential to make profound changes in the "kind of person" they are within a particular context (Gee, 2000).

Self-appraisals play a similar function for teachers as they work closely with others who may view them much differently than they view themselves. As a teacher's identity is constantly reshaped, the narrative they hold of themselves may also be affected. Aslup (2006) examines how teachers' view of themselves is challenged and transformed through interactions that force teachers to confront their own assumptions. The after-school program allows pre-service teachers and students to experience disequilibrium in the self-appraisal process. That is, preconceived notions are about the self and others are often challenged. Participants learn to recalibrate their ability to connect and communicate across self-imposed identity boundaries. Smith and Van Egeren (2008) note that social interaction and engagement has been shown to correlate with positive youth outcomes. Still, that is only part of the picture. We argue that when knowledge regarding the self-appraisal process is thoughtfully deployed in after-school programs, positive identity outcomes are experienced for students and teachers alike.

The next section will describe the after-school program sites in which we worked, the on-campus course activities, and the methodology we used to look closely at our participants and their experiences.

After-school Program Descriptions

The after-school programs in this study are offered at the elementary, middle and school levels. Youth are paired with pre-service teacher education students to positively impact both youth and teacher identity development. The first school in which we work is in a small but densely populated urban school district [7 square miles and ~ 84,000 people] in New Jersey. The majority of students in this district are overwhelming minority and poor with 21.4% of the population living below the poverty level. More than half of those living below the poverty level are under 15 years of age. These racial and economic characteristics stand in sharp contrast not only to the pre-service teacher student body at our college but also to the existing teacher workforce statewide and nationally. Thus, a major goal of the program was to demystify *urban*. For many white middle class pre-service teachers, the term connotes something that is dramatically foreign to their conceptualization of the "normal student."

Methods

At the elementary level, a comprehensive content analysis of teacher journals, observation field notes, and student interview data were analyzed using negative case analysis approach. This qualitative approach calls for the researcher to develop general typologies or themes and actively seek to identify and explain disconfirming cases (Creswell, 1998). All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Elementary After-School Program

Two elementary schools in a small urban district in New Jersey were the sites for this portion of the study. In each of the schools the population is primarily African-American and at least 60% of the student population received free or reduced lunch. The after school programs were funded in part by a statewide grant program and worked in conjunction with a large non-profit organization. This after-school program is primarily focused on homework help and informal mentoring. It is not a particularly well run or effective program. To be sure, it is just the kind of program that could serve to reinforce negative stereotypes that our pre-service teachers have about low income schools and the children in them. However, this is the unfortunate reality in many schools and we want to continue to be a presence in these programs and help to support the students if they want us there. We believe that since sites like these are often unavoidable, it is up to teacher educators to help our students process these experiences in adaptive ways so that they can still be valuable field experiences. Pre-service teachers and other college students have been volunteering in these programs for many years. However, this paper only addresses two years of data.

The groups of college students examined for this study volunteered at the after-school program one afternoon per week as part of the 13-week field experience related to an Introduction to Urban Education course. Of the 17 pre-service teachers, all were women, 5 were from urban areas and 12 from suburban areas. After each visit, students recorded journal entries

that documented their experiences and corresponding reflections. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) write" journals stand as a written record of practice, as they provide teachers a way to revisit, analyze, and evaluate their experiences over time and in relation to broader frames of reference." Journaling became a powerful way for the teacher candidates to record and search for meaning over the course of their time at the after-school program. Open coding helped identify the initial categories and then the data were reviewed again by systematically coding the data to concentrate on the core concepts that were gleaned from the initial round of analysis.

Our class read books such as, *The Children of Room E4* (Eaton, 2009) that discussed both the local realities of a classroom in an historically underperforming school and the larger funding and legal issues that impact those and other students. In class, we compared the court case from that book to one that is on-going in our own state. We also read *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children* by Lisa Delpit (2012) and related Delpit's narrative to their field experiences and as a conceptual starting point to challenge biases as they arise in discussions and journal entries. One of the last books we read is *Racism in the Classroom from Kindergarten to College* by Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda. Berlak and Moyenda (2001) offer a case study of their work with pre-service teachers and the realities of facing one's own bias. During one of the semesters covered in this paper, we Skyped with Moyenda. Pre-service teachers asked frank questions about her views and shared their experiences. The goal was to provide pedagogical supports to assist pre-service teachers in making asset driven developmentally informed meaning of their after-school experiences.

Findings

As a result of reading and coding 143 journal entries written by 17 pre-service teachers over the course of two semesters, four main themes emerged. They include: 1) *guilt vs. anger,* 2) *examining the "why,"* 3) *learning to stay, and 4*) *shifts in perspective.* The first theme*, guilt vs. anger,* refers to the difference in perceptions experienced by pre-service teachers with suburban and urban backgrounds. This theme reflected the reactions that pre-service teachers expressed concerning the after-school program more generally.

Another emergent theme was categorized as *examining the "why."* This theme was related to instances where pre-service teachers had to confront their own biases about urban schools and students who attend urban schools. Pre-service teachers were encouraged to actively engage in analysis of their own thinking and this code captured many of those struggles.

The third major theme was *learning to stay.* Journal entries that were coded in this category reflected pre-service teacher's dissonance toward the school or the students themselves. Clear frustration was evident. However, the pre-service teacher was obligated to stay and face their discomfort. The experience of facing their discomfort and *staying* even when it was uncomfortable yielded valuable insights.

Last, the theme of *shifts in perspective* was assigned to data where a clear shift in ideology was evident. These shifts were most often seen over time. The more days the pre-service teachers spent in the after school program, the more likely it was to see a change in thinking or a realization that was not evident in the beginning of the semester.

Guilt vs. Anger

As stated, this code indicates journal entries that documented the disparate experiences of pre-service teachers with different backgrounds. The pre-service teachers in this study represented both urban and suburban backgrounds and their experiences of the after-school program seemed to fall into two categories related to that aspect of their own culture. For example, pre-service teachers from suburban backgrounds often expressed feelings of guilt, anxiety, and powerlessness when describing their time at the after-school program whereas, pre-service teachers from urban backgrounds typically wrote about feelings of anger and frustration:

> *…it was also incredibly frustrating to see all the disorganization and the lack of anything planned especially for the very young kids because they really can't be expected to behave when they are not doing anything constructive.*

The quote above was a common sentiment among our pre-service teachers from urban backgrounds. Those who had themselves attended historically underperforming schools were keenly and immediately aware of the structural inequities that existed and expressed a profound sense of frustration at the conditions under which the students in these contexts were expected to learn. It was particularly interesting that many of the pre-service teachers from similar schools admitted that they were not cognizant of these conditions when they were students themselves. However, when given the opportunity to reflect on their own developmental experiences, they were able to see the systemic failings in the urban public school system. For example, a Latina pre-service teacher writes:

> *When I was in school I thought teachers who gave you a lot of space were cool. There is a teacher at the after-school program who reminds me of a teacher I loved in high school. But, now I see him through a new lens and I don't like the lack of attention [he] gave the children. He plays around with them, but I do not feel he is really paying attention to their schoolwork. It seems like he was doing his taxes…I just wish [he] paid more attention to the kids and their homework.*

In addition to the reflections from the field, class discussions were integral in helping the PTs process their experiences. Often our discussions in class led to comparisons among classmates. Sometimes, those comparisons manifested in feelings of anger and frustration for those with urban backgrounds. However, for the students from suburban backgrounds feelings of guilt surfaced quite frequently. One student wrote, "*It really hit for the first time that maybe what I thought was a normal education would be considered privileged by others."*

Examining the "Why"

Related to the feelings of guilt and anger that were evident among the pre-service teachers is the examination of why structural inequalities exist. Pre-service teachers spent quite a bit of time reflecting on how "kids are all kids," "they all want to learn and do well," and other similar sentiments. However, the data does not bear out that kids are all the same. The truth of the numbers is that students in urban settings are doing considerably less well academically. So, as teacher education students actually meet the children, they must confront their own biases and

re-examine what they may have thought they knew. In many instances, pre-service teachers found themselves framing their school experiences with the children with a deficit perspective. Further, pre-service teachers were encouraged to actively engage in analysis of their own meaning-making as documented by their journal entries:

> *It was very evident to me today that the kids were not prepared for the homework that they are given to do at home. The time problems are repetitious and they aren't learning anything. They were asking me if they needed to write two 00s or a 30 after the colon and when I asked them what that meant, they just shrugged.*

The pre-service teacher quoted above was critiquing and challenging the types of assignments that are given to the students. Interestingly, she later wrote about how she had given these types of assignments to students as well when she was in her practicum and never gave them a second thought. However, seeing that type of assignment through the lens of a child trying to complete it changed her mind and caused her to question whether certain aspects of schooling were serving to reproduce inequalities rather than supporting student success.

Learning to Stay

This theme arose after noticing that many pre-service teachers wrote about their time with the after-school program in a way that suggested that they were learning about themselves, in-spite of themselves. Stated differently, because teacher candidates were required to attend each week and were assigned to particular grade levels, teacher candidates had to face students over and over again. This level of continuity is particularly meaningful when the initial experience with a student was not pleasant or positive. The consistency with which the pre-service teachers showed up at the program also allowed the students to take risks with trusting unfamiliar adults. Through this consistent and systematic intervention, both pre-service teachers and students were confronted with the choice to either confirm the stereotypes they hold for one another or challenge them. A case that characterizes this well is below:

> *At one point when she [the student] wasn't understanding what I was asking her she said, "I don't want your help ugly" and was kind of taken aback when I said that I didn't like being called names and that it hurt my feelings when someone says something like that to me.*

The pre-service teacher quoted above was deeply affected by this experience. She brought it up in class many times. She said that if she did not have to go back and work with this same student, she definitely would have quit. However, in the fact that she did continue to work with this student each of them was forced to take risks with one another. The young girl was confronted with difficult work and tried her best to avoid it. Her avoidance included trying to alienate herself from the person trying to help her with this work. And, the pre-service teacher had to embrace her attachment to being liked. She expressed how hard it was for her to face this little girl who called her "ugly." Being called a name hurt and she was not completely sure why it hurt so much and why she couldn't let it go. She spent a lot of time reflecting on why she found herself thinking about it so much and what the implications were for her as she entered her career with hundreds, maybe thousands of name-callers in her future.

Over the course of the next eight weeks, this teacher kept coming back and the young girl let her guard down a little more each week. They learned to trust one another and at least this one young student learned that insulting someone wasn't going to be a good method of avoiding work – at least not with this adult.

Shifts In Perspective

The last major theme to be discussed is a result of pre-service teachers being asked to reflect early and often about whether teaching is indeed a good fit for them. We pushed our pre-service teachers to move past the idealistic ideas that they are going to set into their own classroom and produce a Hollywood movie about teaching in the city.

> *It was challenging to work with two students. Noah was very interested and wanted to write and get finished. "D" just wanted to get done. She said several times that she didn't want to do it! This opened my eyes to having a class of 18-20 students and having to teach grammar rules, etc. These are tough concepts. I hope other classes and student teaching help me become more confident, because right now, I would not want my own classroom.*

Each of the pre-service teachers began the semester expressing absolute certainty that they had chosen the right profession. Further, they were all interested in making a career of teaching in urban schools. Yet, two hours per week at an after-school program had them questioning their ability to handle a classroom of their own.

Discussion

In many ways, the challenges experienced and views expressed by the pre-service teachers in this study are not surprising. Most often, we find statements confirming what we already know about White, middle class women when they teach in under resourced and underperforming schools. On the other hand, these are not in-service teachers. They are mostly first and second year college students and are beginning their self-exploration and growth before they ever have the opportunity to take over their own classroom.

These two seemingly disparate groups (White pre-service teachers and Black and Hispanic students) each engage in discovery about self and the other. In this paper, we begin to see the process of identity development with the pre-service teachers. After-school programs that have direct experience with children force pre-service teachers to acknowledge and confront their assumptions. For instance, when Katie found herself feeling hurt and angry with a child who called her "ugly" she did not feel like she could express her anger for fear it would be read as being racist. Katie was forced to think about the implications of how she chooses to deal with behavioral issues with her students.

The after-school program allows the pre-service teachers to experience disequilibrium in the self-appraisal process. The pre-service teachers come into our program with a very idealistic orientation. But, they also often enter believing that our society is a meritocracy and that they can make a difference in every child's life as long as they work hard and care. Volunteering in the after school program is unique in that the pre-service teachers do not have to plan and implement lessons, they just have to show up and provide academic and social support. Consequently, pre-

service teachers are able to focus primarily on relationships. Many future teachers imagine that after-school programs will be easy – they do not realize that it is easier to hide behind a lesson plan and not really get to know the students. In the after-school program, we are one to one with the students. We get to know them and they get to know us. Our beliefs about the students, and their beliefs about us, are constantly challenged.

In addition, pre-service teachers had to either reconfirm or reconsider their choice to teach in urban schools. While they all began the course with a positive outlook about their choice, by the second or third weeks of the program they began to express dissonance about both the urban context and their ability to teach and manage children. Ideas about student knowledge, values, behavior, and the type and quality of interactions with children were continually explored.

The self-appraisal process is the essential developmental feature that we as educational leaders attempt to manage in order to bring about positive identity development among pre-service teachers and students. For pre-service teachers, this means challenging many of their assumptions (often deficit driven) regarding students from urban and urban realm districts. We do this not only through selective reading, lecture, and discussions but also through structured experiences in after-school settings that allow pre-service teachers to experience cognitive disequilibrium concerning themselves and urban students as well.

The literature suggests that there is strong bias on behalf of pre-service teachers that urban students are incapable of rigorous academic engagement (Rideout & Morton, 2010; Ulluci & Howard, 2015) Given that urban students are allegedly incapable of rigorous academics and that there are so many "other challenges," teachers are afforded multiple opportunities to escape from dissonance provoking self -appraisals. Thus, as the bias purports, those that are in urban districts (students and teachers) that manage to achieve do so in spite of rather than because of. This is not to suggest that there are not serious structural, familial, and contextual factors beyond a teacher's control. We are clear that these barriers and challenges exist and that they are formidable. Rather, we are suggesting that in order to preserve a positive sense of self-efficacy, many teachers dismiss their own assets or protective factors (as well as their students). Accordingly, the challenges of teaching in general and in urban districts in particular have been used as a scapegoat to prevent innovation and the more rigorous dissonance provoking self-appraisals required by the profession.

Framing this from a PVEST perspective, attributes such as ethnicity, class, culture, and gender only become either risk or protective factors in relation to a context. So personal attributes or features can only be evaluated in relation to a context. Thus, there is nothing inherently deficit about geographic designation (urban or suburban). These designations only become meaningful in relation to context. Teachers may cope with culturally incongruent school settings (stress engagement) by underestimating the capacity of urban students.

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