

## **Bridging Worlds: Changes in Personal and Professional Identities of Pre-Service Urban Teachers**

**By Katherine K. Merseth, Julia Sommer, & Shari Dickstein**

As the rare teacher of color, I, in many ways, represent the “White” world with my prestigious education, academic language, and professional dress. On the other hand...I also represent the “Black” world with my upbringing, physical appearance, and knowledge and application of community norms and beliefs. Thus, as a teacher of color in an urban school, I face the challenge of bridging my two worlds in such a way that my students can benefit from what I have learned in each.

—*Pre-service teacher education student reflecting upon teaching in urban schools*

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This article explores the motives and evolving identities of one group of graduate students enrolled in a teacher education program at an Ivy League university, who made the choice to teach in urban classrooms. We examine the perspectives these candidates give to the process of learning to teach and how their identities are tempered, challenged, and sometimes strengthened by a 12-week urban practicum. In this work, we give voice to these pre-service teachers in order to gain deeper insight into how they view what it means to teach in an urban public school, a phenomenon Haberman (as quoted in McKinney, Robinson, & Spooner, 2004) has referred to as “an extraordinary life experience” (p. 18).

The subjects of this study offer instructive data

for scholars precisely because these individuals seemingly have a plethora of career options from which to choose. Prior levels of education and academic achievement as well as other professional experiences qualify them for better paying and socially perceived higher status careers. Their choice—to invest 11 months of full-time study and tens of thousands of dollars in a degree which would allow them to pursue a career often viewed as challenging—deserves analysis.

What follows is a brief review of the pre-service teacher identity development literature that grounds the study and a summary of the research methods. We then lay out our findings that suggest that the developing professional identities of these subjects are influenced by the personal identities they bring to the learning to teach process and their experiences teaching in urban public schools. Finally, we offer concluding observations regarding implications of the study.

### **Literature Review**

Extensive empirical and theoretical literature exists regarding the identity development of pre-service teachers (Ottesen, 2007; Poulou, 2007). This research cites elements of the teacher education experience that have an impact on one's identity development and commitment to the teaching profession. These elements include: the student teaching/practicum experience and coursework; the opportunity for pre-service teachers to reflect upon their own assumptions about learning; and the various epistemologies of professors (Brownlee, Dart, Boulton-lewis, & McCrindle, 1998; Campbell, 2005; de la Torre Cruz & Arias, 2007; Otteson, 2007). These researchers agree that, as teachers develop identity, context matters—both in the teacher preparation program and in the practicum where candidates experience classrooms firsthand.

Furthermore, researchers suggest that pre-service programs may impact new teachers' sense of efficacy and contribute to the development of a professional teacher identity (Ottesen, 2007; Rots, Aelterman, Vlerick, & Katrien, 2007). Additional studies offer insights about the influence of pre-service programs on teachers' decisions to enter and stay in the teaching profession (Merseth, Frankenberg, & Taylor, manuscript submitted for publication).

Some studies in this realm of identity development identify what beginning teachers bring to the process of learning to teach (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). One's own experience, or more specifically, the manner in which developing teachers have come to perceive what it means "to teach" frequently impacts the development of a teacher's identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977; Lortie, 1975). Teachers bring "attitudes and beliefs" (Richardson, 1996), "individual capacity" (Lasky, 2005) and knowledge about subject matter and other domains of teacher knowledge (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1986; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988). These factors in turn influence teachers' practices once they are in their own classrooms (Anderson & Piazza, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Lortie, 1975).

Teacher education programs with a specific focus on preparing highly qualified secondary urban school educators are relatively few and appear to vary in their effectiveness (French, 2005; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Merseth, Frankenberg, & Taylor, manuscript submitted for publication; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003). These studies suggest that the ineffectiveness of some programs may be related to a mismatch between students' and teachers' profiles. Specifically, the socio-demographic, racial, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of urban secondary school students are typically in stark contrast to their majority white (approximately 79%), female (approximately 75%), monolingual and middle class pre-service teachers. Those who research these differences tend to examine pre-service white educators' resistance to exploring multicultural issues introspectively (French, 2005; Gorski, 1998).

This article takes a different research approach by examining the changes in teachers' identity while students in a graduate program. Other studies that explore identity development of pre-service teachers are often case studies of fewer than ten individuals or those preparing to become elementary teachers (Britzman, 1991; Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Clandinin, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1991; Kagan, 1992). In contrast, this study incorporates the perspectives of 65 men and women preparing for careers as secondary school teachers.

Teacher identities, either those brought to the process of learning to teach or developed while learning to teach, form a foundation that influences action in the classroom. As Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1992) note, "Teacher identity... is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making... teacher education must begin, then, by exploring the teaching self" (p.21). These beliefs and experiences are the building blocks of a teacher's professional identity. They are essential to understand because all subsequent instruction and experience will pass through these dispositions and experiences, as water passes through a filter (Brownlee, et. al., 1998; Campbell, 2005). Learning about teaching, as in all learning, is an active and constructive process that is strongly influenced by an individual's existing understandings, beliefs, and perceptions (Resnick, 1989). Thus, teacher educators must help pre-service teachers make visible that which may be invisible, make obvious that which seems subtle and thereby help integrate beginning teachers into a professional role.

Building on the work of Kagan (1992), who describes teacher identity development as a process or a "journey" (p. 164), and Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), who add that identity is "not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon" (p. 108), we characterize teacher identity development as an ongoing process of "interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context" (Gee, 2001). We feel this "interpretation"—the understanding of one's personal and professional identity at a given moment in time—is continually shaped by the beliefs, attitudes and experiences brought to and informed by the components of the pre-service teaching experience. Furthermore, we concur with Mishler's (1999) realization, that there is not one identity, but rather many sub-

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identities that may sometimes conflict or align with each other within individual teachers. His metaphor about identity as “our selves as a chorus of voices, not just the tenor or the soprano solist [sic]” (p. 8) is apt as we analyze the expressions of personal and professional identity offered by these teacher education students at the conclusion of their pre-service preparation.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects**

Our subjects are 65 pre-service teacher education candidates who attended an eleven month teacher certification program dedicated to urban education. Sixty-two percent of the respondents were female (40/65) and thirty-eight percent male, with an average age of 26.4 at the conclusion of the program. The ethnicity of this group is represented in Table 1. Sixty percent of the group was preparing to be teachers of social studies/history or English, while 40 percent were in math and science (see Table 2); all were studying to become middle or high school teachers.

Academically, these subjects were very strong. Upon entry to the pre-service program, the mean GPA on their undergraduate records was 3.4. Nearly all attended competitive undergraduate institutions with strong academic reputations including Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Dartmouth and Brown, technical institutions such as MIT, Carnegie Mellon, Georgia Tech and Rochester,

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**Table 1**  
**Racial Composition of the Teacher Education Program**

	Number of Students	Percentage of Total
African American	6	9.2
Asian American	7	10.8
Latino/a	7	10.8
Native American	1	1.5
White	44	67.7
Total	65	

**Table 2**  
**Subject Area Breakdown of Teacher Education Students**

	Number of Students	Percentage of Total
English	17	26.2
Social Studies/History	22	33.8
Mathematics	15	23.1
Science	11	16.9
Total	65	

competitive state universities such as UC Berkeley, UCLA and the University of Michigan, and liberal arts colleges such as Wellesley, Bowdoin, and the University of Chicago. Their GRE Verbal and Quantitative and Analytic Writing test scores are compared to national averages in Table 3.

### **Data**

The subjects responded to the prompt “Who am I as an effective urban educator?” by writing an essay of any length and submitting it to the Director of Teacher Education as a final entry in a “teaching portfolio” which contained a series of assignments. While some elements of the candidates’ portfolios were shared publicly with peers, mentors and program faculty, only the authors had access to these essays.

With multiple reviews of the collection of essays, the authors created data codes and categories that expressed emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These themes were then refined and additional codes developed with the aim to sort the expressions of personal and professional identities into discernable categories (Maxwell, 1996). We drew upon the relevant research literature in noting that beliefs, attitudes and prior experiences would be important in identity development, as would the influence of the teaching practicum (Beijaard, et. al., 2004; Bourdieu, 1977; Britzman, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Lortie, 1975).

### **Analysis**

Exploring changes in identity and the possible influences stimulating these changes is a complex process because this requires a method of analysis that uncovers pre-existing beliefs as well as beliefs and identities in flux. Essentially, the data analysis sought to expose a new understanding of identity development with this particular sample of pre-service teachers. The work also intended to give voice to pre-service teachers at the secondary level which is an under-researched area. Given the nature of the data, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and more specifically “social constructionist grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006) guided the analyses of these essays in order to explore the following research questions:

**Table 3**  
**Graduate Record Examination Results:**  
**Verbal, Quantitative and Analytical Writing Scores**  
(National Mean Based on the Average Performance  
of All Examinees Tested between July 2001 and June 2004)<sup>1</sup>

	National Mean	National Standard Deviation	Subjects' Mean	Subjects' Standard Deviation
Verbal	470	120	572	108
Quantitative	597	151	668	97
Analytical Writing	4.2	0.96	5.13	0.65

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1. What values, beliefs, motivations and personal characteristics do students enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a selective graduate institution cite as important for learning to teach in urban schools?
2. At the conclusion of the teacher pre-service experience, including the 12-week practicum, how do these candidates describe their values, beliefs, and motivations for teaching and how do they describe their professional identities as urban teachers?

### **Findings**

Why do these individuals want to teach in urban schools? Their outstanding academic records and the longstanding research about the low academic quality of teacher entrants combine to suggest that individuals in this group would not have an interest in teaching (Ballou & Podgursky, 1997; Corcoran, Evans, & Schwab, 2004). In addition, research on the sorting of teachers across schools within states and school districts suggests that candidates with these profiles would not elect to teach in urban schools (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). And yet teaching in urban schools is exactly what they wanted to do. We now explore the values and beliefs that serve as a foundation for the personal identities of individuals in this cohort. And in a subsequent section, we examine the influence of the student teaching experience on their developing professional identities.

### **Personal Values: Righting the Wrongs of Injustice**

In becoming middle and high school teachers, many of these individuals sought to change the social, economic and political order of American society. For instance, an aspiring English teacher declared, “For me, teaching is about a higher cause, about moving humanity towards our boundless potentials of kindness, intelligence, awareness, caring, and positive progress...teaching [is] a political act.” Another candidate proclaimed: “I want to teach not as the disseminator of knowledge but as a conscious lifter, co-structor and positive resistor to the internalized oppression of our society.” Continuing, she said she hoped that “the collective din of [students’] voices will rise and resonate to ultimately re-shape our society and resemble more closely the beautiful democratic ideals for which we passionately claim to be authors.”

For some, the clarion call to teach emanated from an outrage over perceived injustices in American public education: “My commitment to urban teaching comes partly from my desire to *do something*. As a citizen in America, I feel that I cannot sit back while segments of our population are denied a good education because they are born Black, Latino, or poor” (italics original). Similarly, a female history teacher said “I want to teach... [to] make sure that everyone in this country [has] access to a high quality education regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background.”

Many subjects framed education as a battleground and used military terminology in describing their motives for entering the teaching profession. A female subject, who planned to return to Texas as a high school English teacher, wrote:

As a teacher, I aspire to be the sword, the power that cuts through [students'] walls and exposes their strength, ...that pierces their minds to a depth that produces a yearning for knowledge...I want to ultimately pass that sword on to my students... I would like to think of myself and my students as 'warrior poets'...preparing for battle.

Others used bellicose terms of conflict, such as "fighting," "battling," "defending the right to learn," "developing an arsenal of skills," and "defeating desperation." These subjects saw themselves as foot soldiers in a battle to 'right the wrongs' of society.

In addition to changing the social, economic and political order of things, a second common theme helping to define the personal identities of these subjects was the influence of their backgrounds and prior experiences. Family values and upbringing, prior schooling and community contexts all played roles in defining who these women and men were before they ever set foot in urban classrooms as teachers. Often, they mentioned social class, race or economic level when answering the prompt about themselves as effective teachers. Their reasons were very personal and reflective of prior experiences. For example, a math teacher who grew up in a poor urban community observed:

My experiences growing up have deeply affected who I am as an urban educator...where I grew up, I do not remember [ever]...hearing of someone's parents being a doctor, lawyer, engineer, teacher, or even secretary...I want to be instrumental in... increasing the success of the students from underserved communities.

Another candidate, the son of Laotian refugees who grew up in a violent community where he was "both the suspect and victim of crimes on many occasions," stated: "I truly believe that no other profession is more important than that of... a teacher...The adversities that I faced along my path...have shaped my thoughts and me as they are today..."

Candidates from positions of higher economic and social privilege also chose teaching because they believed in the power of teaching as evidenced by their own personal experiences as students and young people. Representative of this group was a history teacher who stated:

My educational and class backgrounds stand in stark contrast to the educational and class backgrounds of the students who I intend to teach. I attended private schools my entire life, and had the social mobility and capital to choose any number of career paths upon graduation from college...My ultimate goal is to educate those students who have been neglected or overlooked by the American educational system...

Family members and former teachers grounded these individuals' personal identities. One woman from an academic family noted that "...growing up, I had

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no concept of a 9-5 corporate job. I come from a family where you don't just have a job, you have job that is your passion. Since graduating from college, I have been aware of the effect my high-achieving family has had on me, first as a student, and then as a working adult." Another woman, remembering a childhood of abuse, noted the importance of a relative: "Many [of my high school classmates] dropped out. I wondered why that did not happen to me. What drove me? What made me different was I had support. My grandmother never gave up on me...so I did not give up."

In each of these instances, the pre-service teachers brought their personal identities to the process of learning to teach. Prior experiences, family members and teachers, and community and socio-economic contexts all played an important role in who they were and how their professional identities would develop. One participant articulated the importance of her personal identity as she began to develop her professional identity:

I did not realize how much of who I was would impact my teaching...I had never experienced such an in-depth soul searching as I did here at [this university] this year...I soon realized that all my lessons, my posters, my props, my kids' journals, and the bins I so meticulously arranged for my students to keep their class supplies in were all just parts of an empty shell as long as I ignored who I was and what I brought to my teaching.

### ***Realizations from the Urban Teaching Experience***

The second question explored in this article is the impact of a 12-week full time practicum on the values, beliefs, motivations and developing professional identities of these teachers-to-be. As Kagan (1992) stated, "Knowledge of pupils is used to modify, adapt, and reconstruct a novice's image of self as teacher" (p. 156). While pre-service teachers can create change in their students, these data demonstrate the ways in which students can change teachers and help shape their professional identities (Britzman, 1991; Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Clandinin, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1991). At the close of the urban practicum, new values and insights came to the fore as these pre-service teachers redefined—or at least questioned—their professional roles. Both within the practicum and as a result of it, pre-service teachers began to see the ways in which they could (and at times could not) act as instruments in their struggle for social justice. In their writing and reflecting upon the practicum experience, many pre-service teachers articulated various roles they saw becoming available for them as professional teachers. These roles included becoming inquiring learners, uncompromising, yet supportive task masters and 'teachers as a social and academic bridge.'

### ***Incorporating New Roles into Professional Identities***

Emerging from their practicum experiences, several pre-service teachers observed that successful practice required a level of reciprocal learning between teacher and student. While some pre-service teachers entered the practicum be-



lieving that they only needed to ‘stand and deliver’ content, over the course of the practicum they realized that powerful teaching required something more: they began to grasp and experience the power of listening to and learning from the students. For instance, one history teacher observed, “As an urban educator, it is absolutely vital that I...ask questions so that I won’t miss the chance to learn from my experience, reinvigorate my passion, and redefine who I am in the classroom.” For this candidate it became clear that both the students and the classroom experience would affect his beliefs. Similarly, an English candidate recognized her students’ potential to shape her professional identity: “If I listen to my students, they will help me become the kind of teacher I want to be and the kind of person I want to be.” Finally, a pre-service history teacher observed that the teaching experience would help her “become better at challenging my assumptions, more versed in cultures other than my own, and more empathetic to the harsh realities outside of my privileged world.” The practicum would “allow for ...unquantifiable personal growth.” All of these subjects were incorporating the role of learner into their emerging professional identity.

A second role that several pre-service teachers identified was that of becoming a supportive, yet sometimes firm, taskmaster because they perceived this to be important in guiding adolescents. They likened this role to that of fitness trainers, who push clients to a degree the clients know they need but cannot muster on their own. As a case in point, one pre-service teacher who had learned the value of discipline from years as a ballerina, wanted “to be the urban educator that drives [the students] to get up and get back in the race.”

Often, those who espoused the “tough love” philosophy had had difficult pasts of their own. When one high school student admitted that her classroom misconduct was caused by distress over a sister who had run away, her young teacher—whose own brother had run away and then committed suicide—reportedly told the student,

You have no idea where my life has been and let me tell ya, a runaway sister—I’m not impressed... We do not get to choose our family situations or the lives we’re given, but ...we do get to choose the lives we create, who we will surround ourselves with, and who we will become.

Reflecting on her comment, this teacher candidate continued: “I do not pity my students nor am I scared away by their personal struggles... I am far more concerned about where they are going....”

Several pre-service teachers openly commented on the power of personal relationships. In integrating this value into their professional identities, some subjects noted with surprise that the gulf between their backgrounds and those of their students had little bearing on their ability to connect with students. What mattered more, it seemed, was the degree to which the new educators could establish personal connections. For example, an older white businessman-turned-teacher was initially concerned that he would have nothing in common with his students of

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color. As a result, he requested that his mentor teacher not be white. He reasoned that he himself would have “blind spots” and that someone of color could “teach me how to relate and build relationships with my students, whom I assumed would have more in common with a person of color [than with me].” However, after the practicum experience, this individual observed that “building [personal] relationships with my students is key, and that I may have more in common with my students than I thought...” In another instance, an upper middle class woman realized that emotional connections were more important to successful relationships than shared social class or common experiences:

My interaction with Anne [a student from a poor family] and her mother was something that I had never experienced... Initially, I was afraid that I would appear unfamiliar and out of touch...since my own social location and personal characteristics were on my mind. Yet, as we talked, none of that seemed to matter.

A notable number of candidates described their professional role in a more concrete, instrumental way—as a bridge that students could use to cross to a new world of academic growth. These pre-service teachers felt a responsibility to share their knowledge of the codes of power that they possessed (Delpit, 1988). As a result, these budding teachers shared personal stories of overcoming discrimination, stereotypes, and poverty.

Pre-service teachers of color especially expressed their responsibility to act as a bridge or a translator for minority students. While research results are mixed about the effectiveness of teachers with students of their own race (Dee, 2004; Ferguson, 1998; Hanushek, Kain, O’Brien, & Rivkin, 2005), these individuals felt they were in a unique position to support students of color because they could relate to their students’ experiences with racism. This perspective greatly influenced how these teachers interpreted their professional roles and identities. Two African-American men, both intending to become history teachers, explained their thought processes in detail. The first stated:

My presence as a minority in the teacher pool, combined with my history as a minority in the student body of each university I have attended, contributes to my feeling that I am straddling, ... transitioning between two different worlds—a “White” world and a “Black” world.... The two worlds represent two different cultures, and each culture brings with it its own rules and social norms. In neither world is the culture of the other world fully accepted or embraced. In this sense, I feel that I must straddle the two in order to be successful in each....

Speaking of the practicum’s influence on his professional identity, he continued:

The context of my classroom provides a plane in which my two worlds merge. As the rare teacher of color, I, in many ways, represent the “White” world with my prestigious education, academic language, and professional dress. On the other hand...I also represent the “Black” world with my upbringing, physical appearance, and knowledge and application of community norms and beliefs. Thus, as a

teacher of color in an urban school, I face the challenge of bridging my two worlds in such a way that my students can benefit from what I have learned in each. ... I want to affirm [the students'] own identities while also preparing them for success beyond their community...I must find a way to utilize what I have gained in both worlds, find a bridge between these worlds, and do my best to serve the students by presenting a healthy balance of each.

The second African-American teacher described his personal feelings of responsibility to support students of color who are “so burdened by the negative construction of Black male identity that [they are] not able to feel comfortable being academically successful.” In the process of helping his students benefit from his experience and knowledge, he was developing his own professional identity. He noted,

I think I can be particularly effective in working with many students of color, as to them I can represent a person who has been empowered through education and who can provide an example of ... Black male identity that is an alternative to the anti-intellectual and self destructive images they are often confronted with in popular culture...As an African American teacher, I believe it is my responsibility to help my students navigate through this identity struggle. It is possible to reconcile one's identity as a successful student with one's identity as a Black male.

Several pre-service teachers of color expressed frustration at the personal costs they had paid to become successful in the majority White culture and vowed that this would not happen to their students. One Latina, for example, wrote about how, as a child, she had struggled with her identity: “Nobody ever told me that it was okay to be Mexican-American and successful in school. To me, these concepts were incompatible, so I decided to do well in school and ignore my culture...I don't want any more students thinking that they have to choose between doing well in school and accepting their own culture.”

#### ***Practicum Experiences Deepen Personal Identities***

The practicum experience caused several subjects to deepen their awareness of their own racial or cultural identities. One pre-service teacher, who related her own earlier post-immigration struggles with assimilation, found herself revisiting these issues as she connected with one of her recently immigrated students. She wrote of her relationship with this girl:

We found ourselves sharing a lot with each other about our own lives.... Looking at her and listening to her was like staring into a mirror and hearing my own voice. I saw my student and felt the pain she was experiencing as if it were my own, as if I were back in high school myself.

In some instances, the practicum re-ignited several personal tensions that these pre-service teachers had experienced in their earlier lives. For example, one woman described her “two contrastingly different lives.” Her Taiwanese home culture de-

manded obedience to elders and males, while in school she followed “American ways.” However, during the practicum, her students helped her see the power, rather than the conflict of this dual knowledge: “I have connected most to my immigrant students who have high expectations to live up to at home because that is who I was a couple years ago.” As with the other men and women in the study, the practicum helped her refine her personal identity.

In a profound example, an Asian American teacher described the personal impact she experienced as a result of having Asian American students in her classroom. Even though she had attended a university where over 40% of the students were classified as Asian/Pacific Islanders, she had never self-identified herself as Korean or Asian. Describing her last day of the practicum, she “was shocked when all six of [my Asian students] began crying. . . . And I found myself tearing up as well. . . . The tears were over losing a connection to someone who they could see themselves in.” Later, she recalled her feelings on that last day: “For the first time I want to be seen as Asian. [Before now] I had never wanted to put an ethnic label on myself. But my Asian students have taught me the power of ethnic connections. . . . It has been an empowering experience.”

Other teachers-to-be developed a more nuanced sense of their social class as a result of the practicum experience. A middle class woman, for example, who had experienced the “irony of being smart and Black in high school,” learned that “just because I am Black does not mean that I can automatically relate to a Black student from a single-parent family living in the projects.” For her and for others, it was a startling, first time realization that class mattered more than race.

In these examples, the pre-service teachers brought their personal identities—rooted in family upbringing, class, race, ethnicity or role models—to the practicum. For many, the practicum experience challenged and sometimes altered these identities. When put against the backdrop of an urban school, the pre-service teachers saw their own race, class, and culture—personal identity—in greater relief.

### ***Practicum Experiences Challenge Emerging Professional Identities***

The practicum experience also had a profound effect on the developing professional identities of our subjects. For example, tensions emerged around age, authority and professionalism. With an average age of just over 26, several pre-service students self-identified as young adults. They did not think of themselves, at least upon entry into the practicum, as ‘professionals.’ One aspiring math teacher, for example, asked, “Who am I, as a young white teacher from [this prestigious university] to tell him, an experienced older black father, what to do about his child?” This incongruity, between the self image of inexperienced teacher and the role of professional authority figure, demanded reconciliation. The day-to-day realities of the practicum, school bureaucracies, resistant students, and entrenched school politics challenged their view of themselves.

For some, donning the cloak of authority felt incompatible with maverick identities

they had previously formed. One individual admitted that during his year of teacher preparation, he felt pressure to give up his prior identity as a non-conformist:

In the past I was able to play the role of an outsider to the public school system. . . . As a student teacher, however, my students saw me as an institutional insider, a member of the public school system that was alienating many of them. . . . The journal I kept during the year reflects my inward and outward struggles with assuming the role of an authority figure.

In the practicum, others became aware of further tensions when their personal values collided head-on with their empirical professional judgments. One teacher candidate acknowledged the tension between her wish that her students tread a path of social justice and her awareness that students must pursue their own paths:

I fear that my commitment to social justice could become dogmatic when a successful student. . . chooses a path that will only benefit her/his, as opposed to his/her community. . . . Who am I to judge a student who aspires to be an investment banker, for example, when she has grown up with very little material wealth?

According to Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop in their comprehensive article “Reconsidering Research on Teachers’ Professional Identity” (2004), tensions and transformations of professional identity within the practicum experience are to be expected. They write, “Professional identity formation is often presented as a struggle because [student] teachers have to make sense of varying and sometimes competing perspectives, expectations, and roles that they have to confront and adapt to” (p.115). Several others, including Volkmann and Anderson (1998), also describe this struggle. Whether adopting new roles, negotiating dilemmas between prior and current identity conceptions or deepening their understandings of their personal and evolving professional identities, the practicum and its practicality reign as a most powerful intervention.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study explored the personal and professional identities of 65 teacher education students attending an 11 month pre-service graduate teacher education program in a highly selective institution. The data presented here suggest that the personal and professional identities of these individuals affected—and were affected by—their experiences in the urban teaching practicum. As the professional identities of these new teachers developed, the personal identities that they brought to the process of learning to teach were challenged and sometimes redefined. In the crucible of an urban practicum, facing adolescents—both alike and different from themselves—these beginning teachers deepened their understanding of their personal identities and professional roles and, essentially, of themselves. This review of the self-reported experiences of pre-service teachers evidences rising levels of maturity, growing self awareness, questioning of efficacy, increasing self-

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reflection and a developing awareness of the multilayered complexities that teachers face. These individuals wrestled with developmental issues of professional role and instrumentality. Conceptions of race, class and ethnicity often intensified, and issues already identified as personal now became acutely personal, sometimes even raw. In documenting these personal and professional identity changes, this research provides a unique window into the world of adult development (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

With a focus on changing identities, this work is consistent with that of other scholars who examine the process of learning to teach (Anderson & Piazza, 1996; Beijaard et al., 2004; Brownlee, et al., 1998; Bullough, et al., 1992; Lasky, 2005). Deborah Britzman perhaps best sums up this intense personal and professional growth:

[L]earning to teach constitutes a time of biographical crisis as it simultaneously invokes one's autobiography...it is a time when one's past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension. Learning to teach—like teaching itself—is always the process of becoming; a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become. (1991, p. 8)

Indeed, one teacher in the study echoed Britzman's words about this 'dynamic tension' when she asked: "Is who I am as a person outside of the classroom different from who I am as a teacher? Should it be?"

These findings offer several important lessons for teacher educators and those in universities who design urban teacher education programs. First, using a lens of identity development as pre-service teachers learn their craft gives teacher educators a more nuanced understanding of what pre-service teachers experience in the practicum. Because of myths about urban education, many assumptions that teacher candidates bring to their urban classrooms are challenged by the reality of working in urban settings. This research suggests that as universities consider the components of their urban programs, it is imperative that they pay special attention to what happens during the practicum. The voices of these pre-service teachers well document the enormous social and emotional challenges to personal and professional identities that occur when teacher candidates take charge of a class.

Some teacher educators may believe that their work is essentially over once students leave the university and go to the school site for the practicum. After all, they reason, the practicum is the time when teacher education students merely practice what they have learned. However, universities do themselves and their students a disservice if they claim that the formal methods and foundations courses are the place to learn about teaching and that the practicum is the place to simply practice and repeat what they learned in the afore-mentioned courses.

Learning to teach is a process, not a product, and it is a process that is deeply influenced by the act of teaching itself. Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2001) said it well:

Teaching...can be learned *only* on the job. No college course can teach a new teacher how to blend knowledge of particular students and knowledge of particular content in decisions about what to do in specific situations (*italics added*, p.18).

Thus, it is crucial that teacher educators participate fully at practice sites. The important work of visiting, conducting observations, and helping experienced teachers become effective mentors should not be left to “adjuncts” or “retired teachers.” Teacher education faculty must become equal partners with full time practitioners in the coaching of beginning teachers; they must have a frequent and meaningful presence at the school sites, perhaps even teaching K-12 classes themselves (e.g., Lampert, 2001).

This research also illustrates that the majority of these subjects entered teaching with an agenda of social action and political liberation. They chose a program focused on urban education because they believed that urban schools could be a powerful epicenter of change. They perceived that they could set off dozens, even hundreds, of ripples every year. Whether from privileged or disadvantaged backgrounds, white or of color, male or female, these new teachers profoundly understood the advantages of social location and the value of knowing codes of power. They sought to impart this knowledge to their students in various ways— as taskmasters, as bridges, as role models and as fellow soldiers in the struggle to improve opportunities for all. In so doing, many wanted to level the playing field of injustice.

Urban teacher education programs must recognize that many teacher candidates come to teaching with this political and moral agenda, as well as an academic purpose. Teacher educators would do well to identify these motivations early on, in order to lead aspiring teachers in conscious explorations of these issues. Courses, seminars and other experiences that stress the political nature of schooling will serve to empower teachers like those in this study. A failure to acknowledge the motivation of many *pre*-service teachers will lead to disillusioned *in*-service teachers. If they feel ill-equipped to put their idealistic plans in action, they will leave the profession. Equally grim is the possibility that they will not leave, but will become increasingly discouraged and disengaged.

Even as teacher education programs develop ways to identify pre-service teachers’ motivations for teaching, they must consciously devise strategies to equip these teachers-to-be with the knowledge, methods and approaches necessary to become powerful advocates for their urban students in addition to offering them the critical skills of effective teaching. Those who enter teaching with the desire to address societal inequities need realistic models which can be presented as case studies of other teachers’ attempts to improve opportunities for disadvantaged students; they need to study what made those attempts succeed or fail. A well-crafted teacher education program can play a powerful role in helping aspiring teachers begin their careers with the skills and competencies to become successful teacher leaders or agents of change with progressive goals.

Finally, the teacher education program must play a critical role in fostering reflection about practice. Many of the subjects in this study, including those who were initially skeptical, expressed appreciation for the program’s insistence on active reflection, as they found this helpful to enable them understand and chart their own identity development. One woman wrote,

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One of the most important things that I learned this year was how much who we are shapes and is reflected in our teaching . . . . By reflecting, I discovered how . . . experiences had been playing out in my teaching without me realizing it. I began to accept who I was, my background, and how my experiences shaped who I was . . . . Through reflection, I have learned so much about myself . . . I now recognize that the greatest contribution that [this program] has made to my teaching was not giving me a ‘bag of tricks’ for teaching; it was helping me learn how to reflect on my practice, which in turn, helped me learn about myself.

This research is important for other reasons as well. The students in the study attended a selective university and were academically able by all standard measures. They had undergraduate degrees from competitive institutions and had passed state tests for licensure in general literacy and specific subject matter (a program requirement). Recent research confirms that teachers who are more academically able and who have passed state certification exams tend to have higher achieving students on average (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006, 2007). Thus, building programs that attract and encourage such teachers is one key to raising achievement for all students. This means that programs must be intellectually challenging, enforce high levels of academic rigor and eschew the sometimes mindless, content-thin courses for which some programs of teacher education are notorious.

Finally, no one can deny the importance of a diverse teaching population in urban schools and hence, all teacher education programs must launch aggressive recruitment efforts to attract teachers of color. While research regarding teacher and student race is equivocal (Dee, 2004; Ferguson, 1998; Hanushek, et. al., 2005), the reality is that urban districts are comprised predominately of students of color, many of whom are poor.<sup>2</sup> Feistritzer (2005) posits that only 31% of teachers in large cities are of color with an estimated 17% of the national teaching force consisting of teachers of color (NCES, 2007).<sup>3</sup> Without a concerted effort to recruit more teachers of color, the benefits of a diverse teaching corps will be lost. Both majority and minority students are well served by a diverse teaching faculty (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996) and the richness derived from diversity can only help reduce racism in all parts of our society, not just in schools.

Beginning teachers bring much to the task of learning to teach. Lortie’s oft-quoted “apprenticeship of observation” reminds one that 16 or more years of observing teaching provides a powerful initial lens through which pre-service teachers approach teaching. And yet, this research shows the enormous power that derives from practice. Teachers learn as much, if not more, about teaching and themselves *while* teaching than while studying about or observing teaching.

Documenting and describing what happens to these subjects’ identities as they begin teaching helps answer Willard Waller’s question, posed so many years ago: “What does teaching do to teachers?” (Waller, 1961). Through this exploration of the personal and professional identity paths of teacher candidates, as expressed in their own words, one gains a nuanced understanding of the impact of teaching on teachers.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Material retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics website, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05\\_311.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_311.asp), July 16, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> In 2000, only one of the 26 largest urban districts with enrollments greater than 60,000 students had a majority of white students while eight of these districts had less than 10% of students who were white (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Within pre-service teacher education, Zumwalt and Craig (2005), in referencing the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education Study (1999), state that white students made up nearly 81% of those enrolled in teacher education programs while blacks represented 9% and Hispanics were less than 5% of the enrollees.

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