

Preservice Teacher Learning in an Urban School-University Partnership: Understanding the Complexity of Urban Teaching

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The purpose of this study was to examine preservice teacher learning in an integrated course and field experience in an urban school-university partnership. Study participants included two cohorts of preservice teachers at a large, northeastern research university who were completing a semester-long experience of site-based coursework and fieldwork at an urban high school. Analysis of multiple data sources suggests that participants changed their unidimensional, deficit view of urban teaching evident at the beginning of the experience and learned about the complexity of urban teaching, including the various elements that distinguish urban teaching from teaching in other contexts.

Teacher education programs have been exploring ways to effectively prepare highly qualified teachers as well as recruit teacher candidates into urban teaching. School-university partnerships (SUPs) and professional development schools (PDSs) may provide the context and conditions for improved teacher preparation and, perhaps, for recruiting urban teachers with on-site courses and field experiences, among other things (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Beardsley & Teitel, 2004; Goodlad, 1993; Groulx, 2001; Wong & Glass, 2005). Despite the positive trend in teacher education practice toward increased collaboration between schools and universities, not enough is known about preservice teacher education in partnership, generally, and whether partnership preparation effectively recruits and prepares urban teachers, specifically. Boyle-Baise and McIntyre (2008) suggest “attention to equity, diversity, family, and community needs to become an integral part of PDS principles, perspectives, and practices” (p. 326) more so than in the past. This research examines what preservice teachers learn when teacher education experiences are situated in an urban partner school.

Oakes et al. (2002) argued that “urban teachers need more than the generic teaching competencies,” suggesting that there is specialized

knowledge to be a high-quality urban teacher:

They need to understand the local urban cultures, the urban political economy, the bureaucratic structure of urban schools, and the community and social service support networks serving urban centers. They need skills to draw on and develop urban youth literacies across the academic content areas, promote college access for first-generation college goers, build social capital across schools and community organizations, and create alliances and engage in joint work with other reform-minded teachers (p. 229).

Clearly, being a competent urban teacher means undertaking complex work. Oakes et al. (2002) further suggested that teacher learning is enhanced by participation in meaningful tasks in groups and emerges in and through dialogue.

Grounded in the principles articulated by Oakes and her colleagues, since the Fall of 2002, one large, northeastern research university has required all undergraduate, secondary teacher candidates to complete an experience called “Urban Immersion” (UI). In partnership with a local urban high school, preservice teachers spend one day per week in the school over one semester, completing an integrated curricula of coursework and fieldwork. Key features of UI include a cohort of preservice teachers, site-based teacher preparation coursework, courses co-taught by university and high school faculty, a “bookend” design of cohort course meetings (theory and pedagogy-focused morning meetings and inquiry-focused afternoon meetings), and a partnered prepracticum with pairs of preservice teachers working in the same classroom. UI is deliberately required at the beginning of students’ teacher education program in order to introduce a school context unfamiliar to many of the preservice teachers and hopefully recruit some into urban teaching. The program has been successful in doubling the number of students who choose an urban student teaching placement for their full practicum (Stairs, 2006), and while the university is just beginning to track graduates’ career paths, it appears that many of those who completed urban student teaching are choosing to teach in urban high schools.

The purpose of this study was to explore the question, “What do preservice teachers learn in an integrated course and field experience in

an urban school-university partnership?” Examining learning outcomes is a fairly new direction in SUP/PDS research (Castle, Fox, & Souder, 2006; Wiseman & Knight, 2003). In this study, “preservice teacher learning” was defined broadly to mean evidence of change or growth in knowledge, beliefs, skills, and dispositions candidates exhibited. The methodology for exploring participants’ learning follows a discussion of the conceptual framework guiding this research: the situative perspective.

Conceptual Framework

The situative perspective theorizes one’s learning as dependent upon social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts, not solely one’s individual cognitive processes independent of context (Greeno, 1997; Resnick, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). A situated orientation to epistemology was advocated in psychological literature for years by scholars such as Dewey and Vygotsky, but gained prominence in discussions of cognition over about the last twenty years, perhaps influenced by a rise in constructivism (Resnick, 1991). Viewing learning as a social phenomenon was a major shift from cognitive science that focused on individual elements of cognition with a behaviorist orientation. Putnam and Borko (2000) suggested three conceptual themes central to the situative perspective: cognition is situated in context, social in nature, and distributed across the individual, other persons, and tools. They (2000) argued that the situative perspective, when articulated as three themes, “has important implications for research on the learning of preservice and inservice teachers” (p. 5). For example, when cognition is understood as situated, combining university-based and field-based experiences can lead to preservice teacher learning “that can be difficult to accomplish in either setting alone” (p. 7). The premise is that where the learning takes place is an integral part of how and what a person learns.

Professional development schools may offer one possibility for designing meaningful situated experiences and promoting preservice teacher learning:

Most professional development schools have as a central component the establishment of new learning communities where inquiry, critique, and reflection are the norms. We know little, however, about the impact of these communities

on experienced teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. And we know even less about whether and how professional development schools can be organized to meet the learning needs of both experienced and novice teachers. (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 10)

More research is needed to determine how situated communities like those found in PDSs and SUPs influence learning. Putnam and Borko's (2000) three themes are evident in *Urban Immersion*: learning experiences are *situated* in an urban high school; *social* in its cohort, partnered field experience, and morning and afternoon dialogues; and *distributed* by the people, texts, authentic assignments, and classroom experiences available to participants. Therefore, UI lends itself to a research orientation framed by the situative perspective.

Method

Participants

Study participants included all students in Urban Immersion during Fall of 2004 and Spring of 2005. All 55 students were undergraduates: 48 sophomores and seven juniors; 34 women and 21 men. The participants were pursuing secondary licensure, either through a double major in a content area and education (45 participants) or through a content area major and a minor in education (10 participants). A total of 20 students were English majors and 18 were history majors. Of the other 17 students, nine were math majors, five were Spanish or Hispanic Studies majors, two were biology majors, and one was a physics major. Most were middle- to upper-middle-class and White. Four participants identified themselves as students of color: two African Americans, one Ethiopian American, and one Latino American. Most were public school educated (65%), though many attended private or parochial schools (35%). Regardless of schooling background, most reported attending schools in suburban contexts lacking cultural diversity.

Data collection and analysis

A variety of qualitative data sources were included in this study, including open-ended pre-and post-surveys, coursework, lesson observations, interviews, and artifacts. The purpose of the surveys was to ask the same questions on the first and last days of class in order to learn about students' prior educational experiences, their

teacher preparation to that point (if any), their immediate plans upon graduating, and their prior knowledge of UI course topics. Participants were asked to submit all course papers and all prepracticum reflection journal entries in order to examine participants' learning and experiences over time. Lesson observations were conducted with 23 students teaching 14 total lessons during the school year (either solo or co-teaching). Conceptually-driven sequential sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was utilized to select students to observe, and the purpose of lesson observations was to examine students' practice in relation to their learning. Semi-structured interviews lasting from 30-45 minutes were conducted shortly after lesson observations to better understand participants' impressions of their teaching. In addition to interviewing these participants, two UI collaborators were interviewed to provide further insight into the context and conditions of UI. Finally, several relevant artifacts were collected, including co-instructors course syllabi, course evaluations, and prepracticum materials to further understand the context and conditions of the experience.

Inductive procedures were employed during data analysis (Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were read three times: chronologically (at the time of collection), by data source (e.g., interview transcripts), and by participant (e.g., all data collected from Laura). After reading the data chronologically, a start list of codes was created, including both descriptive and interpretive codes. After a second reading by source, pattern codes were identified, which helped focus on trends in the data during the third reading. Memos were written throughout each step of the coding process, and data were displayed in tables and diagrams to visually represent trends and clarify emerging themes.

Findings and Discussion

One of the most salient themes that emerged during data analysis was that participants in Urban Immersion learned about the complexity of urban teaching. At the beginning of UI, most participants described what makes urban teaching different from other teaching contexts in a unidimensional way. Participants' anonymous, open-ended pre-survey responses were particularly revealing about their prior knowledge and assumptions. Most responses located the differences of urban teaching with differences in students and families, all of which were negative and revealed a deficit view of these "others." Essentially,

urban students and their parents were identified as the “problem” with urban education. Participants said urban students “lack self-control” (UI student, Fall 2004), have “less focus on hard work and discipline” (UI student, Fall 2004), and “bring a great deal of baggage into the classroom” (UI student, Spring 2005). Urban students are “a different group of kids with different attitudes” (UI student, Spring 2005) and come from “broken families with not much support at home” (UI student, Fall 2004), families who “have less time to encourage their children with their schoolwork” (UI student, Fall 2004). One student’s comments reflected most at the beginning of the experience: “A student from the city may have a different home structure than a student in a suburban, private, or rural school. However, teachers must try and work around this” (UI student, Spring 2005). It was clear that the preservice teachers saw urban students and families as different and deficient.

What was absent from participants’ pre-survey responses was any mention of *teaching*, as requested in the survey prompt—what makes urban *teaching* different. In addition, only a few students admitted that they had not been in an urban teaching context and were therefore unsure how to answer the question. If most students only have experience in one schooling context, be it suburban, private, rural, or urban, what informs their perceptions about another context? This analysis suggests that the media often informed participants’ understanding of urban education. As Scott, a participant, said in a post-observation interview:

I’ve never been to public school...I wrote about this in one of my journals, I had the image of Dangerous Minds...I had all these misconceptions about public high school. Well, you look at this stuff that you see in the movies and then like Boston Public [television show] so you think that there’s going to be guys dealing drugs outside the classroom. I thought it was going to be absolutely absurd and—basically it washed away all of these misconceptions and I met a lot of talented kids and kids that had a lot of potential. (Scott)

Scott admitted a change between his prior assumptions and the reality he experienced in an urban public high school, and he came to recognize the assets of the students. Scott’s shift was representative of

the change that many participants experienced by the end of the Urban Immersion semester, which allowed participants to move beyond the singular focus on deficits of students and families and begin to focus on the multiple dimensions of urban teaching that make it particularly complex.

Lack of resources, bureaucracy, and cultural and linguistic diversity were cited numerous times by participants and serve as evidence of their learning about the complexity of urban teaching. For example, on a post-survey response, one student said, “Within the urban school context, teachers must be prepared to be self-sufficient, to deal with inefficient bureaucracy, and to have a diverse student body” (UI student, Spring 2005). Another said, “Money is simply less available, and therefore books, computers, and other supplies may be scarce. Furthermore, the presence of ELL students has to be taken under much greater consideration in an urban school, as well as the bureaucracy” (UI student, Fall 2004). It is significant that participants recognized the numerous elements that make urban teaching unique. Their experiences in a school-university partnership, supported by their cohort, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and instructors, allowed them the space to question prior assumptions and develop a more realistic view of urban teaching grounded in current theory and practice.

Dori’s (a participant) argument in a course paper included the elements that most participants cited when discussing what makes urban teaching different, but it also showed a move from individual factors to systemic factors in urban teaching complexity:

By the time many urban students reach secondary school, they are disillusioned by the educational system. They have observed the difficulty of working through the school system bureaucracy and have had years of learning without supplies, and therefore are significantly behind in academic achievement. The job of an urban teacher includes restoring their students’ faith in the school through creativity, proper planning, compromise, and faith in their students’ potential. Furthermore, the urban teacher has a greater responsibility to aid students’ cultural development and set a system where they can succeed. (Dori)

Dori describes a holistic approach necessary for successful urban teaching. Rather than focusing on students as deficient in some way, Dori cites the system as influential to students' perceptions of school and their gap in academic achievement. She places some responsibility on the teacher to confront systemic inequity in order to encourage students' success with a focus on culture, creativity, and high expectations in the classroom.

Of course, the pervasive inequities in America's urban schools cannot be solved by teachers alone. Yet, McQuillan (1998) argued that we cannot "ignore systemic factors that are intimately connected with this far-too-common injustice" (p. xiii). Dori, in locating the problem with the system, not the students, shows evidence of her learning about the complexity of urban teaching. Multidimensional responses like Dori's were in stark contrast to the unidimensional view of urban teaching evident early in the semester when many participants blamed urban students' persistent lack of academic success on individual failures.

When Alejandro reflected on his growth over the semester, he realized that what he learned about the most were "the complexities of being an effective urban teacher." He talked about always understanding the lack of resources in urban schools, but learning about the bureaucratic and "more basic and daily regulations" was surprising. He learned about what he termed "simple policies, like the number of bathroom passes a student could receive," as well as "legal issues" as he worked in a Sheltered English Immersion classroom. He said, "Although, legally, only English could be spoken, the teachers would bend the rules for the welfare of the student or students." This experience taught Alejandro about how complex urban teaching can be. He learned from his cooperating teacher that there are times when policies and laws intended to improve students' education can sometimes undermine students' progress and best interests, requiring teachers to use their professional judgment to determine the most appropriate course of action. Alejandro and many other participants learned valuable lessons about negotiating contradictory elements in a complex teaching context.

Conclusion

Howey (2006), in the introduction to his edited book on recruiting, preparing, and retaining urban teachers, argued, "Teaching is

complex—especially as conducted in highly pluralistic or segregated schools” (p. 8). He elaborates on this idea by describing three views of teaching as three metaphorical stools. The one-legged stool represents those who view teaching as a craft requiring only content knowledge. The two-legged stool represents those who view teaching as content and pedagogy, requiring content knowledge and a repertoire of teaching strategies to engage learners effectively. The three-legged stool represents those who view teaching as a complex, rigorous, protracted endeavor: “This requires the urban teacher not only be prepared with content knowledge and teaching strategies but also to integrate the urban context into teaching” (Howey, 2006, p. 9). Recognition of the complexity of urban education—the three legged stool—was a major learning outcome for preservice teachers in Urban Immersion.

By learning about the realities of urban teaching early in their teacher preparation program, it seems plausible to recruit and retain the participants who showed particular interest in facing the political, moral, and social justice challenges to improve urban education. Teachers who leave urban teaching often cite lack of student motivation and discipline problems as their reasons for departing (Ingersoll, 2001). Quartz et al. (2003) argued, “Given this link between deficit conceptions and urban teacher attrition, we suggest conversely that nondeficit conceptions may be a crucial factor in retaining good urban teachers” (p. 106). Participants who learned about the complexity of urban teaching in Urban Immersion were afforded the opportunity to question deficit perspectives and recognize the influential factors, sometimes beyond a teacher’s control, that make teaching in an urban high school such challenging and important work. Oakes et al. (2002) suggested that “capable and ambitious young people are eager to become social justice educators, even in the face of realistic portrayals of the political and economic realities that make urban schools so challenging” (p. 231). Urban Immersion is an experience that may serve to recruit these types of teachers.

The way this study’s participants originally located the problem of urban teaching with students and their families is not entirely an urban education phenomenon. In work with preservice and inservice teachers in suburban contexts, one may hear comments about the great challenge of students and families who simply “don’t care” about education. One implication for teachers in all contexts is to consider

macro- and micro-systemic factors more frequently in analyses of what makes their jobs challenging, such as school organization (Ingersoll, 2001), multiple demands on their time and intensification of their work (Apple, 1986), ever-changing curriculum mandates, and even their own feelings of preparedness and competence teaching new content or the same content in different ways.

A second implication is to conduct more studies that examine preservice teacher learning in professional development and school-university partnerships. Over the last two decades, much of the published work on teacher education in PDSs and SUPs includes program descriptions with “lessons learned” (e.g., Chirichello, Starsser, Feola, & Rosenfeld, 2001; Graham, 1998; Henderson-Sparks, Paredes, & Gonzalez, 2002; Meyers & Smith, 1999). These anecdotal and experiential accounts should not be underestimated in their worth as scholars and practitioners can find many ideas, suggestions, and reflections that may serve to improve their own practice in SUPs or PDSs. However, more empirical research like the small study discussed here is warranted to make the case that collaboration matters and to encourage investments of time, money, and effort in PDSs and SUPs.

A final implication relates to the benefits of studying teacher preparation in partnership through the lens of the situative perspective. Situative learning theory affords a framework for theorizing, organizing, and studying learning experiences particularly suited to PDS and SUP experiences. Here, situated, social, and distributed learning revealed the complexity of urban teaching while at the same time supporting preservice teachers’ development into potential urban teachers. As Samaras and Gismondi (1998) argued, “Through situated engagement and negotiation with practitioners and peers in a teaching community, preservice teachers come to define for themselves what it means to be a teacher” (p. 715). By providing a supportive context for learning about urban teaching, it may be possible to counteract negative assumptions about urban education and recruit more highly qualified and competent urban teachers who understand the day-to-day realities of a particularly complex and often challenging teaching environment.

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