

Assessing Preservice Teacher Readiness to Teach Urban Students: An Interdisciplinary Endeavor

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Abstract

Novice teachers who begin their careers in urban settings abandon teaching at dismal rates. Although teacher education programs make varying efforts to incorporate awareness about the diverse contexts of urban schooling into the preservice teacher curriculum--from the "one course approach" to whole curriculum imbedded--little is known about the effects of such curricular efforts on teacher retention in urban settings. An interdisciplinary curriculum and assessment model of preservice teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work in urban settings is discussed.

Introduction

School districts throughout the United States, but most compellingly those of large urban areas, have steadily increased its racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and national origin diversity in the last few decades (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003). This poses a challenge to teacher education programs which must update the programs provided to aspiring teachers--as well as support those already in the workforce--while devising new ways to prepare those who will work in the most diverse settings.

Additionally, new teachers who begin to teach in urban, low-income, diverse schools abandon the profession entirely at alarming rates (Ingersoll, 1997; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). A potential explanation for such poor retention of novice urban teachers may be linked to the types of curriculum, instruction, and assessments teacher education programs employ to teach and gauge their candidates' readiness for such settings¹. In this paper, I argue that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that preservice teachers (PT) ought to possess to work effectively with diverse urban pupils need to be nurtured and monitored not only throughout the completion of basic preparation but also during the first years of teaching. Learning to teach diverse students in today's urban schools can neither be accomplished through the schematic approach of the one-diversity course, nor through isolated field experiences in urban settings if they lack a strong theoretical and reflective component (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005b, 2006). Concomitantly, the processes and tools with which such preparation and induction outcomes are monitored remain a relevant area of inquiry. .

Urban Schools and Urban Teaching

The largest 65 urban school districts in the nation enroll 15 percent of all schoolchildren, and over 31.8 percent of all children in whose homes a language other than English is spoken (Council of the Great City Schools, 2005). Segregation of Latino and African-American children in urban schools is high (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003). Yet, the challenge is far from being one involving the education of those minority groups alone, as metropolitan school

districts report student bodies representative of myriad linguistic backgrounds, which include Spanish but also languages less familiar to American teachers such as Somali, Serbo-Croatian, and Hmong (Antunez, 2003). Most compellingly, whereas almost 40 percent of the public school students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds nationwide (as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch) that number raises to over 62 percent when considering the largest urban school districts alone (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003).

The literature alludes to the urban teaching challenge in different ways. For instance, Au and Blake (2003) narrow the definition of diverse students in the United States to include those who differ from their English speaking, White middle-class mainstream counterparts in three aspects: family socioeconomic background, race/ethnicity, and language used at home. Diverse students so defined are the backbone of urban schools (although it is wholeheartedly acknowledged that the broader spectrum of diversity encompasses much more than those three markers). Similarly, Anderson and Summerfield (2004) identify urban schools as those which receive considerably more federal money for the following areas: bilingual education (now ELL), vocational education, and Title I (supplemental services for low-income children), acknowledging that urban and suburban schools receive federal funding for special education in comparable amounts. The U. S. Department of Education (2004) refers to high need schools as those where 30 percent or more of its families' income are below the poverty line. The National Catholic Educational Association (2006) makes the distinction between *urban schools* as those "within the limits of a major city or one with at least 50,000 population" while differentiating them from *inner-city schools* as those "located within a major city and characterized by a concentration [40 percent or more] of low income inhabitants" (p. 1).

In spite of the different terminology utilized by various agencies, it is evident that urban schools deal with low-income, culturally and linguistically diverse students in ways that grant the need for specialized training for those expecting to become effective teachers of their constituencies. The complexity of urban work settings inevitably poses a challenge to teacher educators in charge of preparing future generations of teachers that can effectively instruct students who endure varying degrees of poverty, speak languages whose structures are unfamiliar to the mainstream, and hold beliefs and values that differ from what the typical American aspiring teacher is equipped to manage.

Curriculum to Address Student Diversity in Teacher Education

In contrast with the increasing diversity of the K-12 student body, and according to AACTE (1996) and NEA (1997) reports, 86 percent of those pursuing a career in teaching are White. Those numbers are consistent with an earlier study by Zimpher (1989), who depicted the typical PTs as females of approximately 21 years of age, born in English-speaking suburban homes, attending nearby colleges and who expressed a preference for teaching in schools whose children exhibited similar social markers. Current research indicates that fewer than six percent of those graduating from education programs wish to work in underserved urban settings (National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2000).

A significant number of conceptual and empirical studies have investigated aspects related to the preparation of teachers to deal with student diversity broadly speaking (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Dilworth, 1998; Irvine, 2003; Murrell, 2001; Vavrus, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Reviews of

research in multicultural teacher education i.e., (Bennett, 2001; Sleeter, 2001) and “reviews of reviews” in the area (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2002) have also been published in prestigious venues.

Two approaches specifically linking diversity curriculum and urban teacher retention can be highlighted. On one hand, a large number of teacher education programs take the “one-course-approach” to teaching about diversity with varying results (Brown, 2004; Marshall, 1999; Weisman & Garza, 2002). On the other, *Center X*, a two-year teacher education program at the *University of California- Los Angeles* (UCLA) with a strong diversity component has endeavored efforts to a study centered on the examination of career pathways followed by over one thousand teachers who received specialized urban teacher preparation. Unlike the typical preservice teacher population nationwide, *Center X* boasts an extremely diverse pool of students—35 percent White, 32 percent Asian, 25 percent Latino, 6 percent Black (Quartz *et al.*, 2005). After rigorous coursework and fieldwork during the first year, *Center X* students are employed as full-time teachers in some of the high poverty schools of Los Angeles during their second year in the program, while completing additional coursework. Preliminary studies suggest that *Center X*'s students remain in teaching after five years in the profession at a rate of 71 percent, in comparison to the 54 percent retention rate of a nationwide sample, and that a large percentage of their Latino and White graduates stay teaching in urban, diverse schools (Lyons, 2005). *Center X* is of relevance to this quest in that it appears to confirm the link between the type of curriculum and assessment afforded to PTs and their increased retention in diverse urban schools, although its highly diverse roster and graduate program's length constitute an anomaly in teacher education.

Measuring Diversity Learning

To assess readiness for diverse settings in teacher education, researchers have relied on inquiry centered on teacher beliefs, concentrating on: (a) the initial beliefsⁱⁱ about diverse populations with which candidates arrive to a given program and the potential sources of such beliefs (Dee & Henkin, 2002); (b) the effectiveness of diversity-related courses in altering beliefs, particularly those that rely on deficit perspectives of diverse students, and the likelihood of belief system change (Brown, 2004; Larke, 1990; Marshall, 1999; Sleeter, 1995); (c) the effectiveness of diversity-related courses in altering practices as PTs complete field placements in diverse settings (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005a; Boyle-Baise, 1998; McAllister, 2002; Murrell, 2001); (d) factors that contribute to PTs' development of multicultural skills and dispositions (Garmon, 2004); and (e) other related factors that affect practice of multicultural education in schools, such as cooperating teachers' own perspectives and habits of practice (Sudzina, 1997; Vavrus & Ozcan, 1995).

Scholars have produced useful models to assess PTs' awareness of and learning about diversity in general that include continua of racial awareness (Helms, 1990) and multicultural acceptance (Diaz-Rico, 1998); and a host of surveys to measure attitudes towards diversity. Although useful in yielding information regarding diversity learning previous to graduation, those efforts shed no light on what happens after degrees are conferred. The model proposed in the next section is a composite of practices at several teacher preparation programs and teacher educators that endeavor to prepare teachers who can effectively work with urban students, conceptualizing the curriculum, instruction, and assessment necessary to carry that goal as a long-term endeavor beyond completion of a program.

Assessing Readiness for Urban Teaching in an Interdisciplinary Way

For multicultural teacher education research purposes, longitudinal research efforts of a program's graduates and their evolving thinking in terms of diversity would provide vital data in the assessment of the program's success with diversity education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In contrast with the one-course approach, this way of framing the education of PTs for diverse classrooms as a program-wide effort includes elements such as clinical supervision, service learning, staff development and school-university partnerships. Those elements can be connected in efforts to design meaningful curriculum and assessment experiences for candidates early in the induction process, and even for cooperating teachers assisting universities in the preparation of future teachers. This model is a roadmap to teaching diverse students in urban settings, and whose implementation should complement other specific goals that each institution has for its candidates.

If the overall goals are to document and monitor the changing beliefs, improved skills, and actual practices as PTs engage urban learners, the process should take place throughout the teacher education program and continue through the first years of teaching. Table I summarizes the various procedures to be considered, and teaching/assessment tools to be administered at different stages and in different disciplines that impact the development of PTs' readiness to work in urban settings with diverse learners.

The table depicts a sequence of instructional and assessment commitments involving various steps. Amongst the most salient are: faculty development as part of the process of preparing teachers for diverse settings (Costa *et al.*, 2005); thorough monitoring of PTs belief changes regarding urban populations (Abbate-Vaughn, 2004, see Appendix I), as beliefs are known to drive behavior (Pajares, 1992); and emphasis on support due to candidates beyond graduation while working in urban diverse schools, conceptualized as a collective effort of university faculty, teacher mentors and school administrators. This model follows evidence from research which suggests that teacher retention in diverse settings is likely linked to the support provided by a quality program (Quartz *et al.*, 2005). It does by embracing a comprehensive approach to diversity in teacher education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that require monitoring PTs' readiness and effectiveness in urban settings.

Table I: Curriculum and assessment for diverse setting readiness

Item	Assessment/evidence to collect	Recipients	Administered/taught by	Stage in program
I- Institute or workshop to develop university faculty awareness of diverse learners.	Changes in faculty's syllabi to incorporate issues involving diverse learners.	Arts and Sciences faculty, all teacher education faculty, school staff.	Faculty specializing in urban, bilingual, and culturally diverse student populations.	Initial and ongoing training.
II- Survey.	<i>Readiness to Teach LCLD Students Survey</i> : pretest (Abbate-Vaughn, 2004, see Appendix I).	Preservice teachers.	First core course faculty or program administration.	First course.
III- Survey.	<i>Readiness to Teach LCLD Students Survey</i> : posttest.	Preservice teachers.	Clinical faculty.	After student-teaching is completed.
IV- Themed clinical interventions clinical faculty training.	Diversity-imbedded student-teaching observation and post-observation protocols.	Clinical supervisors.	Faculty who specialize in instructional strategies and multicultural education.	Prior to assignment of clinical supervision of PTs.
V- Themed clinical interventions.	PTs products that reflect an understanding of the proposed diversity-imbedded interventions (i.e., with specific lesson accommodations).	Preservice teachers.	Faculty who specialize in instructional strategies and multicultural education.	Courses prior to pre-practicum.
VI- Themed clinical interventions.	Themed clinical intervention survey.	Preservice teachers.	Clinical supervisors.	After themed pre-practicum is completed.
VII- Themed clinical interventions.	Pupil survey.	K-12 students recipients of PTs intervention.	Cooperating teacher.	After themed prepracticum is completed.
VIII- Student-teaching.	Clinical supervision observations/logs.	Student-teachers.	Clinical supervisors; cooperating teachers.	Student-teaching.
XIX- Unannounced visits.	Logs/tabulation of instances where showcased interventions are implemented by PTs.	Student-teachers, first-year teachers.	Diversity education faculty, research assistants.	Student-teaching, first-year teachers working in diverse settings.
X- "Critical friends" conversations.	Logs of interaction.	Student-teachers, first year teachers.	Diversity education faculty, research assistants.	After unannounced visits during student-teaching and first-year teaching.
XI- Clinical themed interventions as professional development.	Administrator/teacher initiated requests for staff development on PTs' showcased interventions.	Teachers in partner schools.	Administrators, university and school faculty.	Ongoing.
XII- Percentage of graduates who seek and maintain teaching jobs in diverse settings.	Tabulation of percentage of graduates who elect to work and stay in diverse settings.	Graduates of teacher education programs.	SoE administration with information provided by both graduates and school principals who hire them.	First-year teachers and beyond.

Conclusion and Implications

Teacher educators face the growing complexities of preparing teachers that can successfully teach diverse children in various settings and are retained at higher rates (Ingersoll, 1997). The field must pioneer efforts to promote sustained mentorship to and assessment of graduates beyond completion of a teacher education program. If only from a utilitarian perspective, sustained mentorship of a teacher education program's graduates can in time provide a sizeable number of excellent, geographically accessible cooperating teachers for future cohorts of PTs. From a research perspective, it can provide support to claims that the impact of diversity education in teacher education programs extends beyond program completion and can positively affect teacher retention, helping to provide well-prepared teachers for all children.

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Appendix I

Readiness to Teach Low-income, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (LCLD) Students Survey

1. The number of students who don't speak English is diminishing.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
2. Students who do not speak English mostly live in urban areas.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
3. All teachers can expect to teach students with limited English proficiency.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
4. School districts should refuse to enroll students whose parents are undocumented aliens.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)

5. Schools should ask for proof of citizenship, resident visas, or Social Security numbers when enrolling second language students.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
6. Teachers of courses where English is the medium for the curriculum should allow students to use their native language if it fosters content understanding.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
7. Low-income students stand equal chances for academic success than their suburban counterparts if appropriate enrichment activities are afforded to them.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
8. ELL students slow down the whole classroom because the teacher has to explain everything multiple times.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
9. All languages, including vernacular English, fulfill the purpose of enabling communication, and thus deserve to be recognized.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
10. Schools populated by children of poverty typically don't function well because their parents don't care.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
11. Family literacy programs help schools deal with parental illiteracy and thus encourage parental participation in school activities.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
12. Those whose cultures differ from the mainstream's should learn the "American way" to get along.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
13. Bilingual students with limited English proficiency just need to be placed in an English environment, and they'll learn the language. That's how other immigrant groups did it.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
14. Students with limited English proficiency or speakers of Ebonics can often be helped by placing them in less demanding special education classes.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
15. Parents of students with limited English proficiency are generally not as involved in their children's education as their mainstream counterparts.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
16. Research is unequivocal about the most effective program for students with limited English proficiency.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)

17. English has always been the language for classroom instruction in the United States.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
18. In the United States, Fluency in Latin or Japanese is socially as highly regarded as fluency in Spanish.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
19. Tracking by ability ensures that every student obtains the best possible education.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
20. Students living in primarily Black, Latino, or Asian neighborhoods know enough about diversity and should be used as spokespersons for their communities.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
21. The education imparted in American K-12 public schools has historically been Eurocentric.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
22. Teachers should expect limited academic performance from students who are low-income or ELL.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
23. Multicultural education serves the purpose of helping Black, Latino, Asian, and/or Native American students to “melt” into mainstream settings.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
24. All students should be encouraged to become fluent in a second language.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)
25. A person who truly embraces culturally and linguistically diverse others would consider befriending--as well as dating--people from those diverse backgrounds.
1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)