The Imperative
of Contextual Cognizance:
Preservice Teachers
and Community Engagement
in the Schools and Communities Project

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Teachers working with students and families in 21st century America face unprecedented challenges. Amidst the context of welfare reform and No Child Left Behind, the United States' child poverty rate continues to increase (UNICEF,

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2005), and the achievement gap has reached new thresholds (Ferguson, 2007). Teachers are charged with meeting state standards and often attempting to meet students' basic needs, while institutions of higher education struggle to prepare preservice teachers for a new, tenuous, and shifting educational landscape.

The preparation of teachers in light of changing national demographics demands creative approaches to effectively enhance a belief in the capacity of all children to learn. As such, efforts to effectively engage preservice teachers in the communities in which children develop offer critical opportunities to challenge preconceptions and present new realities. These experiences, then, facilitate a construction of

meaning unlikely to be found in the traditional on-campus experience, as students encounter individuals and perspectives that differ from those in which they were previously grounded (Hytten & Warren, 2003).

Gregory, Gregory, and Carroll-Lind (2006) relate, "children-in-families-in communities are embedded in social realities that provide the matrix in which they grow" (p. 65). While such an understanding and consideration of the "whole child" is common rhetoric in teacher education programs, practices in the academy often belie this appreciation. Altogether too frequently, teacher candidates practice a form of "guerilla teaching"—going into unfamiliar schools, briefly depositing limited content to children whom they have never met, and testing theory in the absence of even a basic understanding of the community in which the school is situated.

Traditionally, there exists alienation between universities and the communities, with preservice teachers "crossing over" in fulfillment of practicum requirements, without the opportunity to truly engage their hearts and minds around the multitude of relationships that inform teaching and learning. Recognizing this divide, hooks (2003) finds "colleges and universities are structured in ways that dehumanize, that lead [students] away from the spirit of community in which they long to live their lives" (p. 48).

With a limited consciousness of the circumstances which inform student experience, teaching can be perceived solely as a skill set, with a naive view that effective lesson plans with well developed objectives translate directly to patterns of achievement. We do a great disservice to new teachers if this is the mindset with which they emerge upon graduation. A strict transfer of knowledge regarding the "techniques" of teaching, however supported in past and current teacher education models (Hunter, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 2001; Tyler, 1949), can no longer be endorsed as adequate, even in the climate of standards-driven teaching in which we currently reside, if relevant and lasting learning is our goal.

Never before have we had so many young children enter schools populated by teachers who reflect neither their race, language, or the communities from which they come (NCES, 2007). A recent survey of teacher education alumni in the United States reports that 62% of graduates felt their undergraduate programs failed to equip them to meet the realities of the children and families with whom they work (Levine, 2006). The report details, "too often teacher education programs cling to an outdated, historically flawed vision of teacher education that is at odds with a society remade by economic, demographic, technological, and global change" (p. 1).

Reform in teacher education over the past decade has shown promise in addressing some of these barriers. Initiatives including professional development/partner schools (Holmes Group, 1996; Osguthorpe, Harris, Harris, & Black, 1995) promote increased partnership between schools, universities, and teacher candidates, affording enhanced opportunities for teaching and learning. While these partnerships have mutual benefits for teacher education programs, schools, and candidates, the role of the community in these partnerships is often ill defined.

According to Zeichner (2005), "The concern is that the schools and universities not become more unresponsive to community needs as they are strengthened through their new alliances."

Urban teacher residency (UTR) programs, a more recent innovation which seeks to provide candidates a longer term, mentor-based experience in urban schools, are showing promise in the preparation and retention of urban teachers (Berry, Montgomery, Curtis, Hernandez, Wurtzel, & Snyder, 2005). While the emphasis of connecting theory and practice in a year-long residency experience further prepares candidates for the transition from pre-service to practicing teacher, the extent to which knowledge of community context is woven into such programs isn't clearly articulated.

An acknowledgement of understanding the context of the developing child is embraced by professional organizations charting the path for highly accomplished educators (ACEI, 2002; NAEYC, 2001; NCATE, 2008). According to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2002),

> Model teachers cultivate knowledge about the character of the community and its effects on the school and students. They develop an appreciation of ethnic and linguistic differences, of cultural influences on students' aspirations and expectations, and of the effects of poverty and affluence. (p. 20)

Learning within community settings provides preservice teachers important opportunities beyond those of traditional teacher preparation. Gallego (2001) comments, "Indeed, without connections between the classroom, school, and local communities, classroom field experiences may work to strengthen preservice teachers' stereotypes of children, rather than stimulate their examination, and ultimately compromise teachers' effectiveness in the classroom" (p. 314). Immersive learning opportunities within communities strengthen preservice teachers' repertoires and provoke new ways of thinking about how different settings create possibilities and constraints for student growth.

This study sought to examine the experience of 22 preservice teachers engaged in The Schools and Community Project, a unique undergraduate experience that encourages the exploration of the community context in which children develop. For a 16 week semester, preservice teachers enrolled in a three credit Educational Foundations course, studying the neighborhood surrounding a particular school, and examining historical and contemporary trends including socio-economic factors, businesses, housing, recreation, and values toward education. The purpose of the study was to analyze the transformative nature of the experience on preservice teachers' attitudes toward community conditions and their potential impact on teaching and learning.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological emphasis on the context in which children develop is critical to understanding the multiplicity of influences impacting the

school experience. Direct contact with family, peers, and teachers effect daily understandings of place and meaning, while linkages between systems such as home and school provide consistency or dichotomy of interactions and expectations. Indirect influences of parental employment and public policy exert a less direct, but nonetheless powerful effect on the extent to which opportunities are present and realized, and more macro issues of classism, racism, and sexism reinforce questions of privilege and power, potentially limiting the extent to which promise is realized. These forces operate interdependently, shaping the fashions in which young children grow and learn.

The framework for the body of Bronfenbrenner's writings is based upon the notion that what happens outside the immediate experiences of the child influences the child's development as much, if not more than direct forces encountered. According to Garbarino (1982), "those who study people from an ecological perspective view individuals and their environments as mutually shaping systems" (p. 16). The systems described by Bronfenbrenner are nested, one within the other. They are all at work interacting and influencing the potential and capacity of the child they encircle. According to Gould (2007),

> Our educational system is made up of a complex web of students, parents, educators, and community members. The system is influenced by politics, economics, and social norms. At the heart of the system is a child whose success in the world depends on the child's immediate surroundings as well as the cultural, social and political attitudes that influence the child's environment daily. (p. 3)

Without an understanding of the full impression these influences exert on development and learning, preservice teachers miss a valuable piece of the puzzle required in maximizing family investment in education and subsequent student learning. A consideration that failing schools often exist within the context of unsupported communities has the potential to decrease the destructive labeling of children and schools as "deficient"—blaming, as Bronfenbrenner noted, "the victims of evil for the evil itself" (cited in Chandler, 1971, p. 195).

Methods

The Schools and Communities Project began in 2007 as a partnership between a Midwestern university's college of education and its local community school system. The Project was conceived as a means through which to engage preservice teachers' understanding of how the context of community influences schools and student learning. Honoring a teacher-as-ethnographer model for reform in teacher education (Delpit, 2002; Long, Anderson, Clark, & McCraw, 2008), the Schools and Communities Project seeks to provide an experience through which learning about communities is central to preparation. Satisfying credit requirements in Educational Foundations, the Project enlists preservice teachers, sending them into neighborhoods surrounding schools to learn from residents the collective history,

wisdom, and values that impact the development of children. The Project takes place in an urban environment with poverty rates more than twice the national average. Community residents are also strongly divided along class and racial boundaries, with relatively small interaction occurring between groups. This lack of interaction also frequently exists between campus and community.

The reflections of 22 preservice teachers participating in the 3-credit Educational Foundations course, a requirement for all students pursuing teaching licenses, were chronicled for the purpose of this study. Of the 22 traditional age undergraduate students, 14 were female, eight were male, and all were Caucasian. A majority of the cohort expressed very little prior exposure to economic or racial diversity.

Preservice teachers in the project directed their inquiry toward a specific neighborhood surrounding a particular elementary school. The neighborhood represented one of the lowest economic vicinities of the city, with an approximate 35% poverty rate. The elementary school serves 334 children in grades K-5 and is a Title I program. The population of the school reflects the neighborhood in which it is situated. Eighty-three percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and test scores fall below state and district averages. For the last consecutive three years, the school has failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Consequently, the school is on Academic Watch. Fifty-two percent of the children are African American, 34% are Caucasian, and 15% are multi-racial.

Throughout the semester, strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood surrounding the school were fully explored through the lived history of its residents. Preservice teachers were charged with uncovering these "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992) that are the foundations from which children come and upon which their future learning can be built. Such "discourse of lived cultures" (Giroux, 1997) provides "an understanding of how [community members] give meaning to their lives through complex historical, cultural, and political forms that they both embody and produce" (p. 140). In the Schools and Community Project, the intellectual, social, and emotional capital of communities (Apple, 1996) is emphasized as a critical consciousness in developing the relationships integral to successful teaching.

In order to examine the transformative aspect of the Schools and Communities Project on preservice teacher perspectives, written reflections of the 22 preservice were examined. At the beginning of the semester, prior to any contact with the community, preservice teachers were asked to consider their preconceptions regarding the district to which they had been assigned. These written reflections provided a baseline through which the course instructor could gauge cognitive and affective orientation toward the work ahead.

Preservice teachers in the Schools and Communities Project practiced their research in a variety of settings. They began the semester on the university campus, acquiring a foundation for their inquiry through reading and dialogue on the context

of culture (Miretzky & Tozer, 2006), and through exploration of resources housed within the university library archives, a rich, historical compilation of community data. These experiences grounded preservice teachers in the history of the community, as well as the contextual significance of the past on present reality. Preservice teachers also received on-campus technical guidance early in the semester regarding qualitative research techniques and the acquisition of digital artifacts through which to document their inquiry. While these initial experiences were critical in providing a base upon which to construct understandings, preservice teachers spent the majority of the semester engaged in fieldwork within the community.

Preservice teachers worked to identify community "knowers" (Palmer, 1997) whose collective experience and knowledge brought to light the realities of life within the neighborhood in which the school was located. With permission from community informants, conversations were digitally documented through audio and video recording for later analysis by teams. Ongoing review of data resulted in new questions and identification of missing voices. This was a reciprocal process through which preservice teachers deconstructed preconceptions about the school and community, and rebuilt new understanding as their investigations continued throughout the semester.

While preservice teachers were actively documenting life within the school and community, they are also reading and reflecting on work of experts engaged in similar ethnographic pursuits (Kozol, 2005, 1992; Newman, 2005). Practicing "critical ethnography" (Thomas, 2003) participants moved from simply describing the culture in which the school was situated, to working to dispel inaccurate perceptions on the part of both the community and school, which interfere with partnerships integral to student success.

Dissemination of preservice teachers' constructed understanding of the community and its effect on the school took place in various ways. At the close of the semester, preservice teachers hosted an open community forum on site at the school where results of their inquiry were shared, and recommendations regarding the potential for increased partnerships initiated community dialogue between members of the neighborhood and school. This event, attended by teachers, community members, and district administrators, provided an avenue through which vision could be collectively shared, and collaborative energy could be maximized. Additionally, aggregated results of investigation throughout the semester were compiled into a project web site. This site, in construction at http://teleplex.bsu.edu/www/edfon420/index.htm, serves as a repository for preservice teachers, as well as current and future school faculty to learn more about the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within the community.

Following the community forum, preservice teachers were asked to reflect on their experience and their understandings of teaching and learning based on their contextual inquiry. Using a constant comparison method of data analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), reflections were coded and categorized along central themes.

Simultaneously, relationships between reflections were compared in order to analyze differing perspectives.

Results

Results of the analysis yielded highly consistent themes among the 22 preservice teachers. The juxtaposition of these pre- and post-experience written reflections is evidence of the transformative nature of their community-based learning.

While opportunities for personal and professional growth abound through preservice teachers' experience in the Schools and Communities Project, their initial assessments of embarking on such a journey revealed noticeable apprehension. Preservice teachers' pre-encounter (Gay, 1985) perceptions illustrate an acceptance of stereotypes commonly held regarding schools and communities where poverty is prevalent (Valencia, 1997). Preconceptions, which follow, exemplify little optimism regarding their impending experience.

> When I heard that our class would be working with [this school] I was disappointed. This is the last school I would choose to work with….[the neighborhood] looks slummy.

> Students will need more motivation. Parents will not be concerned with their children's success. Most students are probably on free or reduced lunch. I assume scores will be low and their school might not be making AYP.

> I have heard that these children are disrespectful and their drive for education is almost nothing. Back talking, kicking, and spitting are just a few of the incidents that occur on a daily basis.

> The safety of this area will be low. Crime rates will be toward the higher end of the scale in terms of robberies and vandalism.

Surveys of the public in the United States indicate that most people assign individual deficiency for economic disadvantage (Adeola, 2005). This is consistent with random samples of undergraduate populations who tend to blame the poor for their condition (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). The nature of preservice teachers' perceptions regarding the economic landscape of the neighborhood indicates a distinct impression of characteristics of both adults and children they will encounter. Pre-encounter perceptions also indicated a concern for personal safety and apprehension toward working within a culturally diverse community.

> The types of people that I have seen out and about in this neighborhood are in the minority of the population. They also seem to be out at all hours like they do not have jobs. I would not feel safe in the area by myself no matter what time of the day it was.

> My preconceptions are that [this town] is big and scary. I come from an extremely small town….I also grew up with racial diversity that was nearly absent. Coming [here] I was scared out of my mind. I had never been around people of different

> cultures and backgrounds. I have been here for three years now and I still find myself creeped out every once in awhile. I don't know much about the district that we will be studying. In the three years I have been here, I have only left the campus maybe twice.

Perceptions of race as problematic are consistent with attitudes of preservice teachers nationally (Marx, 2008). These notions of community deficit frequently fuel a culture of lowered expectations for children, effecting curriculum, and resulting in decreased achievement (Good, 1981; McCoy, 2006; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

By providing direct opportunities for interaction with individuals and organizations in a low income community, the Project sought to challenge preconceived notions, and engage preservice teachers in examination of the structural (Feigan, 1972) issues of capitalism, racism, classism, power, and privilege as factors contributing to community conditions and impacting teaching and learning.

While the pre-experience cognizance of preservice teachers indicated postural barriers to engagement in the community, their direct experiences with individuals, organizations, and institutions challenged their preconceptions, offering alternative views of the people of the community and the context they had previously conceived as deficient. This experience afforded students a constructivist framework through which to develop both a personal and collective critical consciousness previously veiled in their more conventional undergraduate study. According to Florence (1998) such education "desocializes students from traditional relationships and norms of being and knowing….by linking social contexts to academics and honoring scholarship both within and outside the academy" (p. 82).

> A few of my preconceptions were true. The area does have a concentration of African-American citizens, but this is not a bad thing like I thought before. The minority population is very proud of who they are and the heritage and traditions of their community. The neighborhood is not at a disadvantage because of the people who live there.

> When I first learned of the project my first thought was, "what in the world does this have to do with the foundations of education?" However, after I was able to really digest what it was we did, I was able to see that education is so much more than the school, and the students. The community and the environment have a huge impact; I think that alone is something.

> Overall, what I had originally thought to be a very scary, overwhelming, and unsafe project, turned out to be a great learning and educational experience. …I am very excited that we are getting a chance to relay our information to people who can really make a difference. It is my hope that maybe someday people all over the city will have a decent perception of [this school]. It is important for us to remember to not always judge a book by its cover, and by doing so, you never really get to learn about what is on the inside. And it is what's on the inside that can change your views in an instant.

Preservice teachers' post-experience reflections indicate an expansion of the lens through which they view the school, the community, and the processes of teaching and learning. Post-experience reflections also demonstrate a greater depth of understanding regarding teachers' professional knowledge and development.

> This project has had a profound impact on my teaching. It's not just my ability to be in front of a classroom that has improved, but that I have a new respect for the entire teaching profession. I feel that now, more than anything, the attitudes, values, and beliefs of my students will have an intense influence on what happens in the classroom.

> This project has given me a number of things to consider when looking for a place to teach. Obviously, it is now extremely clear that I need to get to know the community when considering a teaching position. Where the kids are coming from has such a huge impact on how the students learn and behave and think about school in general. Without an understanding of the students' world outside the classroom, it will be impossible to successfully teach them.

The Schools and Communities Project thus offers a transformative experience for preservice educators. Embracing an understanding of the "world outside" the classroom as a critical cognizance affords project participants a future orientation that will strengthen their own teaching and learning. Such a cogent appreciation for the contexts from which children come holds promise for enhanced relationships with students, families, and communities, heretofore deemed potentially objectionable and irrelevant to teaching. A revelation of "education as more than the school and its students" speaks directly to the intended outcome of the Project. The development of this ethic on the part of future teachers is a significant accomplishment in a sixteen-week semester.

Discussion

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, preservice teachers in the Schools and Community Project worked to explore both the direct and indirect influences on children's development. From a microsystem level, preservice teachers were charged with learning from students' families, teachers, and residents in the community with whom children had direct daily contact. Members of the faith community represented a wealth of knowledge, providing a context for children and families' spiritual foundation and the literacies in which they were grounded, while neighborhood residents provided both a historical context and the contemporary reality of the neighborhood in which the school was situated. Teachers in the school represented another perspective and reality, and preservice teachers were challenged to juxtapose the school and neighborhood cultures for supportive or potentially dichotomous values and practices.

It is this interaction between microsystems, Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, which is key to the integration of experience and connections in a child's world.

Bronfenbrenner proposed that the developmental potential of a setting is increased by the number of links between that setting and other settings involving the child. In order for successful child rearing to occur, according to Bronfenbrenner, "there must be consensus, connection, and mutual accommodation between the different settings in which the child lives" (1985, p. 49). Communication and mutual respect among the settings and information provided in each setting about the other strengthens the developmental promise of an individual child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner, successful mesosystem interaction patterns are found if there is goal and value consensus between settings, as well as a mutual sense of trust. Consideration of the mesosystem by preservice teachers allowed for close examination of the consistency, or lack thereof, between the systems exerting influence on the developing child, and the potential ramifications if such disconnect was present.

An examination of Bronfenbrenner's exosystem—those systems in which children do not directly participate, but which exert influence on their development, was also integral to the semester. Businesses within the community, parental places of employment, the school board, the city council, the housing authority, etc., are structures within whose walls decisions are made that have significant implications for children. The extent to which these systems are supportive of children and families can exert tremendous influence, realizing or squandering the potential of the developing child. "Exosystem risk," according to Garbarino (1982), "occurs when children lack effective advocates in decision-making bodies" (p. 24). Through examination and consideration of these less direct, but equally powerful influences on children and schools, preservice teachers expanded the lens with which they viewed teaching and learning within the context of community.

Finally, preservice teachers were challenged to examine the larger, more amorphous structures representing perceptions in the immediate and larger community and society relative to the school and its population of children and families. These macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) issues, however less tangible, consisted of the cultural ideology, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that inform all of the previously described systems. Factors such as racism are "like smog in the air" (Tatum, 2003, p. 6) and impact the extent to which the capacity of children and communities are realized. Larger societal attitudes regarding class and subsequently endorsed pedagogy (Payne, 2005) focus on a deficit and remediation approach, in lieu of building upon the strengths of families, and forming lasting partnerships between schools and communities. Perceptions within the larger community in which schools reside based on historical and cultural narrative inform the extent to which the school is supported by human and economic capital. These larger factors, although the least direct in their impact, exert a nonetheless daunting influence on the promise and potential of children and schools. It is not only necessary, but also imperative that preservice teachers consider these issues in relationship to their future work.

As a result of participation in this project, preservice teachers have begun to better realize the connections between schools and the communities where they are

situated. The shift in their preconceptions beginning the experience, compared to their final reflections is indicative of both cognitive and affective transformation. While many preservice teachers began the course with a fear of the communities in which the schools are located, they are leaving the project with, in many cases, changed perceptions and a more socially just philosophy toward their teaching.

Such a shift is well documented in literature detailing individuals' experience with new cultural contexts (Ford & Dillard, 1996; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1994; Sleeter, 2001). Beginning phases of such a process call for a critical self-reflection and typical deconstruction of ingrained, albeit subconsciously, attitudes and beliefs. Initial confusion, disorientation, and eventual resolution and clarification regarding perception of self and other characterize these stages.

The Schools and Communities Project challenges preconceived notions and encourages preservice teachers to deconstruct previous conceptions in light of new understandings. The conflicting nature of such cultural immersion augments opportunities for development, and results in beginning clarification and resolution of new realities among preservice teachers. The potential for these changing beliefs to positively influence preservice teachers' future relationships, which contextualize teaching and learning, holds promise for such models of reform in teacher education. In support of this paradigm, Sleeter (2001) reports the combination of "extensive community-based immersion, experience, coupled with coursework, seems to have the most promise" in such post-secondary initiatives (p. 102).

A growing body of literature supports the impact of community-based, immersive learning facilitating the development of constructs outlined above (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Cooper, 2007; Giroux & McLaren, 1996; Harding, 2005; hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 2001; Zeicher & Melnick, 1996). This form of "engaged pedagogy" affords preservice teachers the experience of "learning as a whole process rather than a restrictive practice that disconnects and alienates them from the world" (hooks, 2003, p. 44). In the study of cultural contexts, an anthropologic orientation to teacher education can strengthen the extent to which the construct of culture is witnessed and internalized (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Additionally, the recognition of the worth of local wisdom can increase the extent to which culturally relevant curricula are developed and implemented (Zeicher & Melnick, 1996). From an advocacy standpoint, such community-based study can bring to life structures of power inherent in school and community relations, revealing deficiencies which jeopardize democratic ideals promoted in the foundation of public education (Giroux & McLaren, 1996). The imperative for contextual cognizance among preservice teachers sanctions a vision of "venturing into home and community worlds", "uncovering funds of knowledge and networks of support [which] honor and build upon what children know" (Long, Anderson, Clark, & McCraw, 2008, p. 266).

The Schools and Communities Project has already benefited the community schools and the community at large through both information sharing and by pro-

viding a forum for cross-community dialogue. Administrators in the community schools have expressed that the quality of education in the district would significantly improve if both teachers within the system, and preservice teachers participating in practicum and student teaching experiences were more informed about the schools and the neighborhoods in which they are nested. As such, administrators have begun using research from the Project for the recruiting and training of new teachers.

Redefining the pedagogy of teacher education, and shifting the focus from teacher-expert to teacher-learner is at the heart of the Schools and Community Project. Long, Anderson, Clark, and McCraw (2008) remind us, as teachers, that "spending time in homes and communities for the purpose of enlisting family and community members and children as teachers in *our* education" is requisite to our preparation (p. 267).

While the extent to which such preparation among these preservice teachers will translate into more effective partnerships resulting in improved teaching and learning is ultimately uncertain, research has begun to mount demonstrating the positive effects of preservice preparation on actual teacher behaviors and subsequent family and community engagement in education (Garcia, 2004; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). Such family and community relationships are the means through which students are co-supported at home and school—the two worlds of childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1970). In a later work, Bronfenbrenner (1990) asserts, "The effective functioning of child-rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires establishing ongoing patterns of exchange of information, two-way communication, mutual accommodation, and mutual trust between the principal settings in which children and their parents live their lives" (p. 36). It is through such support that child and school outcomes can be best realized, and through which teachers and families can best develop new ways of knowing and supporting the developing child.

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