

The Learning and Practice of Preservice Teachers in an Urban School-University Partnership: The Struggle to Enact Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper reports on an interpretive, collective case study that examined preservice teacher learning and practice in an urban school-university partnership. Multiple data sources were collected from 55 predominantly White middle-class preservice teachers at a predominantly Black and Latino high school, including pre- and post-surveys, coursework, lesson observations, interviews, and artifacts. Findings suggest participants clearly articulated their learning about culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), but they struggled to apply their learning in practice. This study confirms that important preservice teacher learning can take place in urban school-university partnerships, especially if the teacher education experiences make explicit applicable theories such as CRP.

INTRODUCTION

This study is framed by two research problems. First, school-university partnerships (SUPs) and professional development schools (PDSs) are teacher education collaborations that may provide the context and conditions for improved teacher preparation and for recruiting and preparing urban teachers with on-site courses and field experiences, among other things (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Guadarrama, Ramsey, & Nath, 2008; Peterman, 2008; Wong & Glass, 2005). However, not enough is known about preservice teacher education in partnership, generally, and whether partnership preparation effectively recruits and prepares urban teachers, specifically. More research is needed to link the context of the partnership to the outcomes for preservice teachers (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Sleeter, 2001; Teitel, 2001), especially related to culture and urban teaching.

Second, a call has been issued by some in the profession to conduct teacher education research that focuses more on connections between what preservice teachers learn in preparation experiences and how they apply that learning in their practice with pupils (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). This line of research is still developing. Clift (2008) argues, “There is little data to provide links between an individual’s knowledge, their learning within a teacher education program, their actual teaching in schools, and their students’ learning” (p. 828).

This small study aims to make a contribution by reporting findings from an interpretive, collective case study that examined preservice teacher learning and practice in one urban school-university partnership. In this partnership, preservice teachers completed secondary teaching methods and inquiry coursework at one high school every Thursday before and after school for one semester in conjunction with spending the school day working in classrooms with teachers and students. Participants were partnered to work in classrooms teaching individuals, small groups, and whole classes of students throughout the semester.

Primarily drawing upon the theories of Irvine and Armento (2001) and Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) was a conceptual framework for organizing the curriculum and instruction that participants examined in coursework and were encouraged to apply in fieldwork. As Irvine and Armento (2001) explain:

The term *culturally responsive pedagogy* is used interchangeably with several terms such as culturally responsible, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally compatible, culturally relevant, and multicultural to describe a variety of effective teaching approaches in culturally diverse classrooms. These terms all imply that teachers should be responsive to their students by incorporating elements of the students' culture in their teaching... Responsive simply means reacting appropriately in the instructional context. (p. 4, italics in original)

Irvine and Armento (2001) assert that culturally responsive teachers develop meaningful personal relationships with students, allow for teachers and students to share stories about their lives during class time, reflect on their teaching, and maintain high standards and expectations for students. This may sound like effective teaching in any context, but as Ladson-Billings (1994) explains, culturally relevant teachers draw upon students' cultures as part of the regular curriculum and learning experiences. She found that "students' real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the 'official' curriculum" (p. 117):

Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (p. 17-18).

Culturally responsive pedagogy is especially pertinent to the urban context where students represent many cultures and worldviews and need support to navigate hegemonic practices they face in and out of school. Weiner (1999) advises new urban teachers, "Generally speaking, you can win [urban students' and parents'] confidence by making intellectual and social space in your classroom for cultural differences, acknowledging that all students bring life experiences, beliefs, and ideas that are no less worthy of examination than your own or those of classmates" (p. 55-56). Approaching urban teaching from the stance of cultural responsiveness was a major goal of the school-university partnership experience and a primary focus of the research study.

Theoretical Framework

A primary assumption of the research reported here is that context influences learning. Donnell and Stairs (2010) assert that “urban teacher learning is not represented by discrete pieces of knowledge but by teachers’ grappling with professional decisions that take into account their knowledge, skills, commitments, and dispositions while situated within their social context” (p. 192). Therefore, this research draws on situative and sociocultural perspectives of learning.

The situative perspective theorizes one’s learning as dependent upon social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts, not solely on one’s individual cognitive processes independent of context (Resnick, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Similarly, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes the influence of culture (broadly defined) on learning, as well as the social nature of learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). When applying situated and sociocultural perspectives in this research study, learning was viewed as an active process of constructing meaning and connecting new information with known information, a view of learning drawn from cognitive psychology.

Putnam and Borko (2000) argue that the situative perspective has important implications for research on inservice and preservice teacher learning: “The physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the learning that takes place within it” (p. 4). They suggest that close partnerships between schools and universities offer one possibility for designing meaningful situated learning experiences for teachers “that can be difficult to accomplish in either setting alone” (p. 7). More research is necessary to understand how situated learning communities like SUPs and PDSs influence learning.

Feiman-Nemser (2008) notes the usefulness of sociocultural theories when studying teacher learning:

Socio-cultural theories are particularly useful in longitudinal studies of learning to teach because they focus on how the various settings in which teachers learn—university courses, student teaching, schools and classrooms, mentoring relationships—enable and constrain their adoption and use of new knowledge and practices and their ongoing learning. (p. 700)

Though the research study reported here was only one year in length, applying situative and sociocultural theories to data analysis allowed for attention to how the context enabled or constrained teacher learning and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The study explored the following questions: What do preservice teachers learn in an integrated course and field experience in an urban school-university partnership? How does preservice teachers’ learning inform their practice with urban high school students? Collective, interpretive case study methodology was employed (Stake, 1995, 2000).

Participants

Over the course of one school year, two cohorts of predominantly White, middle-class, undergraduate preservice teachers participated in this study at a predominantly Black and Latino high school in a major metropolitan area. The fall cohort included 33 participants, and the spring cohort included 22 participants. This study aimed to understand each individual participant's learning and practice as well as the learning and practice of the 55 preservice teachers as a whole. Therefore, the unit of analysis began at the individual level and extended to the entire group of participants who completed the experience over one academic year.

Table 1: *Demographics of Participants*

Race	White	Black	Asian	Latino
	48	3	3	1
Gender	Women	Men		
	34	21		
Year in College	Sophomores	Juniors		
	48	7		

Note: n = 55

The participants were randomly assigned partners from the same content area for their work in classrooms. Participants were not required to co-teach with their partners, but they were encouraged to do so. Partners worked with one cooperating teacher for two periods and a different cooperating teacher for the third period to allow for a variety of experiences with mentors, students, and sections of courses (e.g. regular education, special education, sheltered English immersion).

Setting

The research was conducted at a comprehensive high school of 1,200 students in a large northeastern U.S. city. The high school has a long-standing, formal partnership with the research university that the study's participants were attending. The semester-long, introductory teacher education experience for the participants incorporated required university coursework and fieldwork at the high school. At the time of this study, the student body of 1,200 was 46% Black or African American, 40% Latino, 8% White, and 6% Asian. About half of the students were English language learners, 20% received special education services, and 75% received free or reduced lunch. The school ran on semesters and four blocks per day with an 80-minute block schedule for all classes. (Table 2) With two course meetings after school hours before beginning fieldwork and 10-12 weeks of integrated coursework and fieldwork, participants spent 80-90 hours on site over the course of a semester.

Table 2: *Typical Schedule for Study Participant*

Time Periods	Activities
8:00-9:30 a.m.	University coursework led by professor; Brief meetings with field experience supervisors (High school's Block A)
9:30-10:25 a.m.	Work in classrooms, Block B (shortened block for participants due to university course meeting)
10:30-11:50 a.m.	Work in classrooms, Block C
11:55-12:20 p.m.	Lunch with professor, field experience supervisors, and/or cooperating teachers
12:25-1:45 p.m.	Work in classrooms, Block D
1:45-2:15 p.m.	Meet with cooperating teachers and/or field experience supervisors
2:15-3:30 p.m.	University coursework led by professor and co-instructor (cooperating teacher from the high school)

Data Collection and Analysis

A variety of qualitative data sources were gathered and analyzed for the study. Data sources for the two cohorts of preservice teachers included 52 matched sets of open-ended pre- and post-surveys, over 2,000 pages of coursework assignments and field experience reflections, 14 lesson observations with 23 participants², 14 interviews with 23 participants, and over 200 pages of artifacts.

Open-ended surveys were administered at the beginning and end of each semester to understand participants' prior school experiences, plans for the future, and background knowledge about course topics. Five additional selected-response questions were included on the post-survey to gather further information about perceptions of the school-university partnership teacher education experience. Coursework assignments and field experience reflections were collected to capture each participant's growth over the semester. Lesson observations of solo- and co-taught lessons provided evidence about application of participants' learning; the participants selected for observation were purposively sampled in order to observe both solo- and co-taught lessons across all of the content areas. Post-observation, semi-structured interviews

² These numbers reflect the fact that some of the 14 observed lessons were solo-taught and others were co-taught.

provided further evidence about learning and practice. Finally, relevant artifacts that were collected included course syllabi; instructor's lesson plans, handouts, and field notes; and other published materials about the teacher education experience, such as the field experience handbook.

Procedures for data analysis were grounded in Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data were read three different ways: 1) chronologically as items were collected, 2) by data source, and 3) by participant. After the first reading (chronologically) a start of list of codes was created inductively, including both descriptive and interpretive codes. After a second reading (by source) pattern codes were identified, which made trends in the data more evident, especially after the third reading (by participant). Memoing and displaying data in matrices were helpful in making sense of the data. As data were synthesized into findings across cases, confirming and disconfirming cases were sought related to each finding.

RESULTS

Analysis of multiple data sources suggests preservice teachers clearly articulated their learning about culturally responsive pedagogy, but they struggled to apply their learning in practice with high school students. The pre- and post-surveys and lesson observations most informed these findings.

Learning About Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

As reported on pre-surveys at the beginning of the semester, most participants claimed that teachers follow their passion, enjoyment, and interest in secondary curriculum and instruction, revealing that most participants lacked prior knowledge about the professional nature of planning curriculum and instruction for urban schools. Though a few participants mentioned taking students' interests into consideration, none mentioned incorporating knowledge about students' cultures into lesson planning. Participants located the teacher at the center of instructional decision making, assuming that the teacher's subject matter interests would make the content interesting for his or her students. A few students recognized that the curriculum may be prescriptive, citing either district textbooks or standardized test topics as determinants of what and how content is taught in classrooms. However, most stated that the teacher's passion for the content was the critical factor in decisions about teaching and learning.

This perspective, which centers the teacher's content knowledge and interests in planning curriculum and instruction rather than the students', is not supported by the theories of culturally responsive pedagogy. Strong content knowledge is important for effective teaching, but culturally responsive teachers "believe that knowledge is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 25). The semester-long, school-university partnership experience was designed to convey this view of knowledge, and evidence suggests that participants did learn about the importance of culture in curriculum and instruction.

By the end of the urban school-university partnership experience, participants de-centered the teacher and centered the students in instructional decisions. This excerpt typifies post-survey responses:

There is a curriculum that [teachers] must follow, but they can also gear the teaching towards the students they have in their classrooms. The students are of greatest importance in deciding how to teach the material. (Participant, Spring Cohort).

Privileging the students in curricular and instructional decisions was a clear shift for most participants, and attention to culturally responsive pedagogy is an important aspect of privileging students' voices in urban schools. One student revealed attention to culture on a post-survey response:

Cultural diversity in students impacts the way teachers teach material. Teachers need to be aware of the different cultures present so they can establish methods that are appealing and understandable to everyone. Especially if there are ELL/ESL students in a class, the teacher must take note of it and realize that they may struggle learning particular things due to lack of fluency in the language. Teachers must adapt to these differences to ensure the education of everyone in the class. (Participant, Fall Cohort)

This response, typical of post-survey responses, is quite different from the responses participants noted on pre-surveys. What most participants learned throughout their urban school-university partnership experience is that culture matters in teaching. They knew that culturally responsive pedagogy would enhance teaching and learning in their school context, and they were able to articulate this understanding by the end of the semester.

The Struggle to Enact Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Observations of 23 participants teaching 14 lessons revealed that, although they clearly articulated an understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, participants struggled to apply their learning in practice with urban students. In analyzing how they applied their learning, attention was paid to evidence of CRP features described earlier in this article (e.g. drawing upon students' cultures in curriculum and instruction, sharing personal lives, holding students to high academic standards). Out of 14 lessons, three lessons applied CRP consistently and well for an entire 80 minute lesson, five lessons applied some aspects of CRP with more traditional instruction, and six lessons did not apply any aspects of CRP. It should be noted that nearly all of the lessons were well delivered by the participants and well received by the high school students and the cooperating teachers, including the lessons that did not show evidence of CRP. However, the larger point is that participants' articulated an understanding of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, yet did not translate this learning into practice. Table 3 summarizes the data.

Table 3: *Participants' Application of Learning about CRP*

Application of CRP	Regular Education	Special Education	Sheltered English	Honors
Consistent	3 (3)			1
Inconsistent	3 (2)		1	
No Evidence	3 (2)	3 (2)		

Note: Number in parentheses indicates # of co-taught lessons in that category.

The three lessons that consistently applied culturally responsive pedagogy held students to high academic standards while drawing upon their interests and cultures as part of the learning process. All three of these lessons were co-taught in regular education classrooms. Preservice teachers in this group included five White women and one Black woman.

Five lessons showed evidence of drawing upon students' interests and cultures as part of the instructional plan, though inconsistent in application. Of these five lessons, three were in regular education classrooms (two co-taught and one solo-taught), one was in an honors classroom (solo-taught), and one was in a sheltered English immersion classroom of beginning English language learners (solo-taught). Preservice teachers in this group included two White women, two White men, one Black woman, and one Asian American man.

Six lessons showed no evidence of culturally responsive pedagogy in planning or delivering instruction. Of these six lessons, three were in regular education classrooms (two co-taught and one solo-taught) and three were in special education classrooms (two co-taught and one solo-taught). Preservice teachers in this group included five White women, four White men, and one Ethiopian American woman.

Two questions to consider when looking across these data include: 1) What kinds of classes received what kinds of instruction, and why? and 2) Who was able to apply their learning about culturally responsive pedagogy, and why? The three lessons that best exemplified CRP consistently throughout an entire lesson were all co-taught in regular education classrooms. One explanation for this is that co-teaching provided these participants the confidence to plan culturally responsive lessons with the high school students' needs in mind rather than focusing on their own passions, interests, and familiarity with topics. However, there were two co-taught lessons that inconsistently applied culturally responsive pedagogy and four that did not show evidence of applying their learning at all. This signals that co-teaching may not have been a factor in enacting CRP. The classroom context may have been more important.

Lessons solo- or co-taught in the regular classes, honors classes, and the sheltered English immersion class revealed evidence of CRP, yet the special education classes observed did not. This may be related to the individual participants simply not being able to translate what they

learned into practice with their students, or holding beliefs about how special education classes should be taught that do not include cultural responsiveness. It may be that the special education teachers allowed these participants less voice in instructional decision making and, therefore, their cooperating teachers influenced the content of their lessons. It is disconcerting that the special education students were not afforded opportunities to experience CRP in the lessons observed.

In considering which participants were able to implement CRP, three of the four student teachers of color who were observed teaching did, consistently or inconsistently, apply culturally responsive pedagogy. Of the lessons that did not apply CRP, one was taught by a recent Ethiopian immigrant, who may not personally relate to the U.S. legacy of minority struggles, and the rest were taught by White preservice teachers. The cultural backgrounds of the students of color, African American and Asian American, may have had an influence on deciding that culturally responsive pedagogy presented an important and valid way of approaching instruction in an urban high school. However, five of the six preservice teachers who consistently applied CRP were White. Like the co-teaching factor noted above, the cultural background of the preservice teachers cannot fully explain why or how culturally responsive pedagogy was enacted. It may be that certain aspects of CRP are more easily enacted by new teachers, such as developing relationships with students and sharing personal stories during class versus drawing on students' cultures as part of the regular curriculum, or some new teachers may simply be more developmentally ready to enact new learning.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this age of accountability with a persistent focus on outcomes, it is imperative that research is conducted examining the link between preservice teachers' learning and their practice. This study makes a contribution to the teacher education research by providing an in-depth look at learning as an outcome for preservice teachers in one school-university partnership. If universities are committed to recruiting and preparing highly qualified urban teachers, this study confirms that important preservice teacher learning can take place in urban school-university partnerships, especially if the teacher education experiences make explicit applicable theories, such as culturally responsive pedagogy. Many participants struggled to translate learning into practice, but some were able to apply their learning for all or part of their lessons, and these preservice teachers showed promise as effective urban educators. This was an introductory teacher education experience in an undergraduate teacher education program. With more coursework and fieldwork in the urban context, it is plausible that these participants would continue to develop their abilities to translate learning into practice.

The school-university partnership highlighted in this study provides a continuum model of teacher preparation where, in addition to the 22-35 early field experience student teachers each semester, there are often more advanced early field experience students and full-time student teachers in the same classrooms as the beginning student teachers. Inquiry groups of university

faculty, inservice teachers, and preservice teachers meet weekly during common planning time to discuss promising practices and share student work as a basis for improving instruction. Due to the numerous opportunities for learning in the SUP, it is likely that beginning teachers in this partnership high school will be able to enact culturally responsive pedagogy with more practice and continued support from the university and school-based professionals at the school site. It is necessary to conduct follow-up studies charting the participants' progress as they become seasoned teachers.

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