Resilience Development of Preservice Teachers in Urban Schools

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Retention of teachers in urban schools continues to plague public schools. Could universities increase the likelihood that teachers will stay in urban schools longer by preparing them for some of the adversities they may face and helping them develop resilience in relation to these challenges? Could we produce resilient educators before they embark on their career path? The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of two preservice teachers in urban student teaching placements. It extends the research of Sagor (1996) and Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) and applies the concept of Competence, Belonging, Usefulness, Potency and Optimism (CBUPO) to an urban student teaching experience.

Teacher education programs in the United States face a challenging and critically important charge. They are responsible for generating 2 million new teachers by the next decade (Olson, 2000). Teacher preparation programs are responsible for producing teachers who are ready to face the many challenges of public schooling. But, preparing teachers is just part of the challenge. As big, if not a bigger challenge, is that of retaining teachers. Teacher attrition and transfer continues to be a concern and denotes instability in the teaching force (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, Weber, 1997).

In the new millennium, teachers in all schools need the skill set to "bounce back" from adverse conditions. Adverse conditions are often very prevalent in urban schools. If

teachers are not able to press through trying times, they are likely to leave the field or become increasingly dissatisfied with their career (Ingersoll, 2001). Ideally, teacher preparation programs would produce resilient educators.

Conceptual Framework

Urban Schools and Retention Issues

Inner cities can be difficult places to live and teach, presenting unique factors compared to suburban and rural counterparts (Patterson, Collins & Abbott, 2004; Sachs, 2004). These factors can often compromise the education of students and the teachers who teach them (Patterson, et al; 2004). The teacher who chooses an urban school must maintain an ideal of service despite unrelenting conditions that constantly, both directly and indirectly, sabotage them (Weiner, 1993). Until recently, few scholars have recognized that the problem in urban schools is not recruitment but retention (Salvador & Wilson, 2002).

Fewer resources (Darling-Hammond, 2003), poorer working conditions and facilities, limited access to textbooks and supplies, fewer administrative supports, and larger class sizes contribute to the challenges of teaching in an urban school (Harris, 2002). In addition, teachers are responsible for working with many students and families who have a wide range of needs (Darling-Hammond, 2003) with less parent involvement, lower student motivation and less than satisfactory academic skills (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999). These are just some of the factors making urban schools different and challenging environments in which to teach.

In addition to the challenging conditions, the literature details various reasons why urban schools may have a difficult task in retaining teachers. Racial, political and economic divides (Weiner, 1993), insufficient preparation (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999; Quartz & Associates, 2003; Sachs, 2004), job dissatisfaction (Ingersoll, 2001), and retirement compound the already taxing environment.

Resiliency

A fitting interpretation of resiliency related to a study of preservice teachers in urban schools is the capacity to successfully manage obstacles in the road before us while maintaining a straight and true path towards life's goals (Brooks & Goldstein, 2003). Resiliency equals "a unique, powerful combination of tenacity (willingness to keep trying in the face of set backs), optimism (belief in the probability of success), and impact (commitment to standards)" (Bernshausen and Cunningham, 2001, p.6). Simply put, resilience means achieving positive life outcomes in spite of risk (Werner, 1995). Central to the concept and development of resiliency are protective factors. Protective factors are "characteristics within the person or environment that mitigate the negative impact of stressful situations or conditions" (Henderson & Milstein, 2003, p. 8) such as those prevalent in urban school systems.

Sagor (1996) created the acronym "CBUPO" which stands for the following terms as they apply to enhancing and developing resiliency in children: Competence, Belonging, Usefulness, Potency, and Optimism. Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) examined the importance of resiliency on teacher preparation and retention by applying CBUPO to teacher education programs that subscribe to the Professional Development School (PDS) model. This study is an extension of the work of Sagor (1996) and Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) by applying their findings to an urban student teaching experience.

Preservice Teachers and Resiliency

Preservice teachers must recognize and develop the resources that will sustain them and increase resilience as they enter their initial stage of the profession (Bobek, 2002, p. 202). Leaving resiliency development up to teachers once they get into the field is a gamble when trying to maximize retention. Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) believe

teachers who are experiencing stress must be taught resiliency. A teacher candidate who gives evidence of resilience, of taking charge to solve problems may add to the school in important ways that bolster student achievement and school success (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004).

Method

Participants

To examine the ways in which a preservice teacher exhibits resiliency, a descriptive qualitative study was conducted. Using ethnographic and phenomenological tools, the lived experiences of two preservice teachers placed in urban student teaching placement were studied. Each participant was a second semester senior enrolled in the Integrated Bachelors/Masters program at the University of Connecticut majoring in special education.

All student teachers are concurrently enrolled in EGEN 297- Student Teaching Seminar, a three-credit course instructed by the researcher. After receiving an information sheet describing the study on the first day of class, students were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate on a separate demographic form. Because classroom observation was critical to the study, the principals of the schools where the student teachers were placed received a letter describing the study to notify them research would be taking place in the schools. Two students volunteered to participate in the study.

Allison. Allison is a white woman and a college senior in her early 20's enrolled in the Integrated Bachelors/Masters (IB/M) program at the University of Connecticut. Allison's mother passed away when she was in the beginning of her college career, which had a profound impact on her. The relationship she had with her father was strained at the time of the study. During student teaching, Allison transitioned from living with her father to living alone in a condo. She is an only child.

Brooke. Brooke is also a white woman and a college senior in her early 20's enrolled in the IB/M program at the University of Connecticut. Brooke stated that her father's influence was important in her choosing to become a special education teacher. Coming from a strong nuclear family, Brooke lives at home, and gathers a lot of support from her family. She has two younger brothers, one a student at the same university, and the other in a rural elementary school. Brooke's faith is important to her and she attends church on nearly a weekly basis.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant Observations. The researcher's role in City Public Schools (CPS) as Professional Development Coordinator (PDC) was an important factor in data collection. The primary role of a PDC is to serve as a liaison between the public school partner (City) and the university (UCONN).

From participant observations, field notes were collected, coded and analyzed as data. These data came from informal interviews, classroom/school observations, and school-wide interactions with members of the school community.

Interviews. Three formal iterative in-depth interviews were conducted over the course of the spring semester while the preservice teachers were in their student teaching placements. In addition, informal interviews took place at appropriate times such as after classroom observations.

Material Culture. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003) material culture can assist to "better understand the social worlds" being studied (p. 198). Reflective journals, e-portfolios, and critical incident assignments from class are examples of items used as material for this study.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Field notes, material culture and transcribed interviews were

coded, sorted and categorized to identify similarities and differences among the data. The data were reviewed several times over several months to allow for patterns and themes to emerge (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The researcher used Sagor's (1996) five attributes, Competency, Potency, Usefulness, Belonging and Optimism (CPUBO), as the analytical framework for this study and Richardson et al's (1990) internal and environmental protective factors.

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Rigor

The researcher employed five strategies suggested by Rossman and Rallis (2003) to "enhance the credibility and rigorousness with which you conduct a qualitative study" (p. 69). The nature of the researcher's role in the public schools and university allowed for a "prolonged engagement" necessary to provide more certain insight into the phenomenon. Various sources of data over multiple points in time and using different methods of collecting data ensured triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants were given the opportunity to review all data sources to elaborate, disagree or validate the researcher's conclusions.

The public school and university served as the community of practice, where certain individuals were utilized as critical friends. The community of practice and critical friends provide a forum for the researcher to discuss ideas and theories as they emerge from the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "peer debriefing", the process allows for an unveiling of the researcher's mind to gain clarity, confirmation or new direction.

Results

Competency

Allison and Brooke's competence, the first of Sagor's (1996) resiliency attributes, was repeatedly tested while student teaching. Both encountered cognitive dissonance

during their student teaching experience that led them to contemplate issues around their general competency as future educators. Specifically emergent as challenging were procedural skills such as time management, classroom management and lesson planning. Being confronted with feelings of incompetence seemed temporary, but repeatedly reduced their confidence and self-efficacy. Another situation which provided great insight into Brooke's perception of her competence was the university's evaluation process. Both student teachers worked throughout the semester to derive meaning from what they were experiencing in order to strengthen themselves personally and professionally.

Neither Brooke nor Allison appeared very self-aware of their strengths or what they used as protective factors when faced with adversity. The concept of self-awareness relates closely with self-confidence, self-efficacy and an individual's perception of competence. Both women could easily state multiple things they could be better at doing or needed to improve upon, such as lesson planning and classroom management.

Belonging

Belonging, one of Sagor's (1996) attributes to enhancing resiliency, seemed void from Allison and Brooke's lives during the semester in two ways. Neither Brooke nor Allison could report a sense of belonging to the school or classroom in which they were placed. Also missing was a strong connection with the university, a component to the program that both students noticed, valued and yearned for on a more regular basis. Further exacerbating a diminished sense of belonging was an apparent variability in what experiences and opportunities preservice teachers were being afforded. For example, student information they were privy to during their placement was not consistent and changed the experience as a result.

One of the variables impacting the experiences Brooke and Allison had during their student teaching placement was

the cooperating teacher. These relationships proved to be complex and convoluted, important and influential to both women. Cooperating teachers seem to have a considerable impact on how a student teacher feels in terms of belonging.

Potency and Usefulness

Potency and usefulness are two separate resiliency attributes that Sagor (1996) cites but were combined into one for the purpose of this study due to the contingent relationship one had on the other. Despite having a desire to teach in urban schools, both student teachers reported awe and surprise at the conditions and challenges presented in the settings. Allison and Brooke felt they could have been better prepared for the cultural, economic and political complexities of the environment. The dissonance surrounding theory and practice puzzled and frustrated them, but both women remained steadfast to civic service and social justice for children as cornerstones of their careers. Feeling potent, as though they were having an impact, was very important to them. The harsh realities urban schools can sometimes present only seemed to fuel their desire to serve.

Optimism

Sagor (1996) describes increasing optimism and thus resiliency as a result of the enhancement of competency, belonging, and usefulness/potency. This study corroborates the theory that optimism is contingent on the other resiliency attributes. It demonstrates that Allison and Brooke had days when they felt defeated, incompetent, unpotent, and unsure if they belonged in teaching. They also had confident days, when they felt they were making a difference and having an impact on their students' learning. Both women indicated that they could not see themselves anywhere else except in the urban schools they were placed. Brooke's journal provides insight into an optimistic day:

It is a real confidence booster when you start to see

yourself and feel yourself getting better. I'm wondering at the end of the two weeks left of this experience, if I will feel prepared or if I will feel like I still need lots of guidance. I was really proud of what I was able to accomplish with my students today--I hope there will be more days like this (Brooke, journal, 4/8/05).

A week later, Brooke, considering the end of her student teaching, contemplates with optimism what she will do in the future:

I almost feel as though it is my duty to continue to come back and support this school with my education and resources. I feel safe at this school, and I love it. I feel almost as though it is becoming a second home (Brooke, two weeks before student teaching ended).

Allison reflected on her experience and described it as "the best thing that ever happened to me". Considering everything she had been through this semester, it was surprising to hear her have this outlook. She further explains that it was very difficult but also "I think it's been great though. I don't know how to put this, great but painful, painfully great" (Allison, Interview 2, p. 38). Allison is someone who sees the opportunities that crisis can sometimes present. She describes her optimistic passion for urban schools, "It's so worthwhile, I think it's the most worthwhile place to teach, there's nowhere else that I want to go (Allison, Interview 3, p. 2).

Discussion

An important aspect to note in the study was what protective factors contributed to student teachers being able to handle adversity. When asked directly what buffered them

against hardship, Brooke and Allison had a very difficult time articulating protective factors or their individual strengths, which suggested a diminished sense of self-awareness.

Self-Awareness

The importance of self-awareness toward the path of resilience was established in the literature and confirmed in this study. Some surprising data that emerged from the study was Allison and Brooke's lack of knowledge of what sustains them in their lives. With some prompting, they began to identify things that enriched their lives and what they considered their strengths. The conversations around topics of self-awareness were a struggle. Allison identified "working hard" as her strength. Brooke eventually needed a lot of prompting and said she was a "good friend" and good at "crafting things" such as scrap booking. Both of the participants were intelligent, caring, reflective, seemingly introspective people as evident in their ability to enter into a highly competitive program and participate meaningfully in seminar discussions.

It appeared as though Allison and Brooke had given little thought to what assisted them in getting through adversity despite their apparent usage of many protective factors such as humor, flexibility, a strong commitment to civic service/social justice, seminar, the ability to make meaning from their experiences, role models, and the support of the cooperating teacher and university supervisor.

Assisting preservice teachers to identify ways to rejuvenate, nurture and protect themselves during times of difficulty may enhance their ability to sustain harsher conditions. Being able to overcome adversity, or becoming more resilient, could enhance teacher's ability to stay in-service longer, especially in areas where retention is an issue, such as urban schools. It would greatly benefit preservice teachers to be aware of internal and environmental protective

factors, which ones work for them, and how to insulate themselves during adversity through their implementation.

Nieto (2003) conducted a study of seven highly respected, award winning, urban high school teachers to find out why they remained teaching in the Boston Public Schools. Teachers described hope and possibility for their students and education in general. They spoke of feeling anger regarding the injustices their students faced, and desperation to stay teaching despite such little support and resources. The opportunity to shape the future, a strong commitment to social justice and powerful interactions with their students were reasons these teachers gave for not leaving urban schools (Nieto, 2003). Several of the experiences relayed by Allison and Brooke reflected the work of Nieto (2003) and illustrated why they felt the inclination and commitment to teach in city schools.

Perceptions of Resilience

While discussing how resilient they perceived themselves to be, Brooke was able to joke that she has not "exactly had the most positive, warm, wonderful experiences" at the school where she was placed, and adds "I have to be resilient if I keep coming back here". She attributed the primary reason for her desire to return to this school to the kids and states, "as much as I feel some support from some staff members while other staff is distant, it is the students that keep me coming back to this school". Brooke views herself as a tougher person now, but "not in a bad way, in a good way". She sees "toughness" as a necessity to survive in an urban school in order to deal with things that would "normally would have ruined or upset her day."

Allison described her resilience now as "resilient but with limitations". After learning what her limitations were and understanding herself better, she realized she is now "resilient with knowledge behind it versus just blind like I can do it, it's no problem" (Allison, Interview 3, p. 22). Perhaps what Allison meant is that she realizes she may need

to access resources to help her maintain the high level of functioning she was used to prior to student teaching.

Allison described the journey her resilience took over the semester, whereas Brooke related her resilience to a level of perseverance over a longer period of time. When we think of Allison and Brooke's resilience in terms of Sagor's (1996) attributes of Competency, Belonging, Usefulness/Potency, and Optimism, every situation and interaction likely contributed to the adversity they faced or to the protective factors that buffered them to combat the adversity.

Necessity of Adversity

Many of the situations that Allison and Brooke faced during student teaching are not mutually exclusive to urban schools, but could be indicative of any placement. Situations perceived as adverse are catalysts for the development of resilience (Bobek, 2002). Rushton (2000) describes feelings of dissonance as normal and part of an adjustment process that can contribute to the refinement of skills, albeit slowly and sometimes painfully; an improved self-efficacy through perseverance can result. Allison and Brooke both came to understand their experiences this way. Lane (2003) emphasizes "cognitive dissonance may be necessary for novices to confront their own beliefs and images and acknowledge that they need adjustment…student teachers need to understand that benefits may accrue from immediate discomfort" (p. 4).

Despite the challenges, Brooke and Allison decided to return to complete their Master's internship in the same urban district they were placed for student teaching.   In 2006, Brooke accepted a job teaching special education in the school where she student taught. Allison accepted a job in Brooklyn, New York also teaching special education. Both women seemed to experience a metamorphosis throughout their experience. Their resilience did change as a result of student teaching and the adversity they faced during that time. It can be determined that resiliency is not a static

state, but continuously evolving through a variety of exposures and experiences. Through the identification and utilization of protective factors, Allison and Brooke appeared to have acquired greater feelings of competence, a sense of how to fit, understood the usefulness and potency of their presence, and embraced their ebb and flow of optimism.

Implications

Some preservice teachers desire to become social justice educators, despite knowledge of the political unrest and economic hardship that compromise urban schools (Oakes, Franke, Quartz, and Rogers, 2002). We must learn what makes teaching in urban schools a fulfilling career and build upon that knowledge by supporting preservice teachers towards a career as change agents. The development of resiliency and protective factors may be a way for teacher education programs to arm preservice teachers with additional tools to buffer adversity in urban ones.

Bobek (2002) describes teacher resiliency, the ability to face and adjust to adversity while increasing one's competence, as a critical element in teacher retention and classroom success. Despite what we know about new teachers, the support they need, and the challenges of urban schools, districts continue to place the most inexperienced teachers in the most difficult schools and classrooms, setting beginning teachers up to feel like failures, reducing their self-confidence, leaving them defeated (Colbert & Wolfe, 1992) and with little choice but to leave urban schools. Even the most prepared teachers could falter in this situation if not armed with the artillery of resources needed to support them.

The resources needed to support new teachers are rarely available in urban schools, and ultimately new teachers are left on their own. Urban teacher failure and shortages will likely continue if new ways are not considered in preparing teachers for urban schools (Matus, 1995). Proactive and conscientious attention to resilience development while

preservice teachers are in their teacher education programs may assist and support a new generation of teachers to stay in the teaching profession longer.

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