

# Critical Perspectives on Urban Teaching and Learning: Four Projects in One Urban College of Education

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## **Abstract**

*This study encompassed four different projects implemented in one urban College of Education. Projects included discussions in the faculty diversity self-study group, teaching and learning about culturally responsive pedagogy in an early childhood methods class, the use of fieldwork as a site for student learning about educational change, and teaching and learning about critical literacy in professional development sessions conducted at an elementary school. Following the descriptions of individual projects, joint analysis of these projects is offered by using lenses from a four-dimensional critical perspective (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).*

**Keywords:** Urban, Diversity, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Critical Literacy, Qualitative Pattern Analysis

*“We were told that our cat had fleas; I had never seen a flea in our place, ever. But once you had the Borax down, then suddenly, every now and then you could see fleas hopping...*

~Edward  
Faculty Member

## **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

This paper’s purpose was to provide a reflective analysis describing four projects, all conducted within one urban College of Education, and collectively analyzed against a critical framework. What was truly unique about our work was that we’ve analyzed these projects on two levels encompassing both individual project analysis and cross college analysis. From our analysis, it was revealed that all projects pointed towards similar directions and through this paper, our aim was to share insights about problems encountered and uncovered and how we attempted to deal with these issues.

Our urban college of education has a strong mission statement concerning diversity. In 2007 a group of education faculty formed a self-study group focused on diversity. This group’s discussions and subsequent actions were similar to putting Borax on a cat with fleas which emphasized racism and classism present but invisible, ignored, and/or denied. In-house research indicated that students gain knowledge of culturally-responsive urban education but have few opportunities to practice it (Peterman & Beebe, n.d.). An analysis of pre-service teachers’ field placement evaluations (Thomas-Alexander, 2009) found no statistically significant differences between interns’ positive ratings on a Likert scale of *experiences* in urban and suburban placement sites; however, some interns wrote

negative comments on evaluations about *being placed in urban schools*. Despite positive experiences, students expressed honest feelings by asking “Why would I request to go to the ghettos of [the city]?”; “I don’t want to teach Black children.”

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper was grounded in Critical Pedagogy and used a framework for analyzing interrelated dimensions of projects described (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

Critical perspectives on pedagogy examine ways that unequal relations of power and privilege are entwined through interactions of teachers, parents, children, teacher educators, and pre- and in-service educators in school contexts and beyond (Apple, 2010). This requires critically examining perspectives and ideologies, both invisible and visible, frequently identified as “natural” (Anderson, 1989; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Also relevant to critical pedagogical perspectives and practices is self-reflection engaged in by *all* participants. Children, pre- and in-service teachers, and teacher/researchers interrogate their histories, practices, and beliefs as well as those of others (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996; Rogers, 2003).

Lewison et al. (2002) and Van Sluys et al. (2006) provided a framework of dimensions for understanding varied critical approaches. These dimensions are: “disrupting the commonplace,” a process of providing new lenses on taken-for-granted occurrences by problematizing them and raising questions; “interrogating multiple viewpoints” by bringing to the fore the “multiple and contradictory” voices of participants, particularly those often excluded from interactions where decision-making and other

activities of the powerful occur; ~~–~~“focusing on sociopolitical issues” by making visible ~~–~~“outside” forces in society and the ways they are embedded in learning interaction; and ~~–~~“taking action and promoting social justice” through agency in which participants use knowledge and understandings generated through collaboration, activity, and self-reflection to create greater equity.

## METHODS

All projects were grounded in the concept of teacher as researcher and critical reflector (Craig, 2009; Milner, 2007). Qualitative means were used to analyze data collected in the form of recordings of discussions; written reflections by teachers and teacher education students; student presentations; teacher artifacts such as lesson plans and action research projects; children’s artifacts; pre/post questionnaires; and evaluation protocols. Project analyses used multilayered pattern analysis (Gregory & Williams, 2000) and constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998) to identify patterns and themes within data. Our joint cross analysis used dimensions of a critical pedagogical framework (Lewison et al., 2002; Van Sluys et al., 2006).

### Project Descriptions

This section provides description of each project and includes its goals, data, and individual analysis highlighting emerging themes (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, pp. 117-118).

#### **Project #1 - Exploring Diversity: Lessons Learned From an Education Faculty Self-Study Group in an Urban College of Education by Grace H. C. Huang**

A group of faculty was formed through a study group, called *The Diversity Self-Study Group*. Project #1’s goal

was to analyze the study group's discussions occurring during two years. Fourteen members from four of the college's departments and two offices attended bimonthly meetings. Group members included 4 African Americans, 9 European Americans, and 1 Asian American; 11 females and 3 males.

## **Emerging Themes**

**Programmatic fragmentation within the college.** Participants highlighted lack of continuity in the college and lack of support for students' developmental processes in exploring diversity issues. Course offerings and content did not provide seamless connections for students to engage in and reflect on diversity. Courses lacked developmental design to progressively introduce diversity knowledge.

**Faculty concerns about student "deficits" and their own knowledge and skills.** Faculty described students as lacking diversity knowledge, ability to self-reflect, and motivation (e.g., emphasizing subject area content while ignoring diversity issues). Participants recognized students' learning was developmental. Faculty recognized they lacked experiences and confidence with diversity and were motivated to look for learning opportunities and resources to enhance skills and repertoire for teaching diversity.

**Gap between urban mission and urban practices.** As participants examined urban mission and practices, they discovered discrepancies despite a recent accreditation process. Incongruity was identified from students' work, feedback, and faculty teaching practices. Sam conveyed negative messages regarding urban teaching. He said, "I kind of told them a horror story. I was not selling this right. I would say: I cried in my car a lot; . . . I didn't think I was

going to make it. But I wasn't telling them how I grew. All I'm telling them is how bad it was and yet I still survived.”

**Discussion in relation to social, cultural, gender, and political issues.** The 2008 election opened up dialogue concerning hidden issues of ethnicity, gender, and politics rarely discussed. A metaphor (fleas and borax) was used to describe this phenomenon (see the excerpt on p.3).

**Taking action to address the issues.** Action steps to address diversity issues were initiated including identifying programmatic fragmentation within the college and forming an ad hoc committee examining urban practices. The committee initiated discussion through college departments, faculty needs assessment, diversity presentations, the College's partnership conference, and then organized a publication team.

### **Project #2 - Kidwatching and Reconceptualized Home Visits by Dinah Volk**

This project investigated an assignment where students observed and interacted informally with two children to practice culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). Students who were recent immigrants were involved through an early childhood methods course spanning four semesters. Sixty-nine immigrant students were undergraduates and 14 were graduates; 21 were African American and 56 White, with 1 Jordanian American, 1 Egyptian American, 1 Indian American and 2 Chinese, and 1 Saudi.

Undergraduate students completed 20 hours in a classroom and graduates conducted a visit and interacted with families at home or in community settings.

### **Emerging Themes**

**Making strengths visible and valued.** This assignment was effective by challenging deficit assumptions and giving skills and confidence for seeing children in new ways. Basheera discovered a child making books at home and asked him to share during a book-making project. Talia learned that a child helped his father with yard work and when the school participated in a park clean up, asked him to teach the class the names of tools he used.

**Seeing race.** Developing understandings of diversity followed differing trajectories. White students learned they could talk about race and other aspects of diversity. Susannah's comment was typical of the White students: "I learned that being open and honest is better than avoiding a 'pink elephant' that is lingering around the room that everyone sees that no one wants to talk about." African American students were practiced at talking about race but challenged to address race *as teachers*.

**Seeing the teacher education students.** The course instructor was challenged with listening to her students and acknowledging developing ideas and skills. It was easier to focus on pre-planned messages or issues of child development rather than responding to perspectives addressing complexities of power and privilege.

**Helping mentors and parents see students as learners from parents.** Students' implementation of family and community engagements was mixed. Some connected with families but difficulties arose for others: mentor teachers had trouble understanding the importance of the experience; parents were cautious; students felt they lacked language to communicate with teachers and parents. Despite challenges, graduates found interactions eye-opening and challenged

assumptions. The instructor and students reworked the assignment for effectiveness.

### **Project #3 – Fieldwork: A Space of Commitment and Quandry by Anne Galletta**

This project took place at Lake Elementary School, a diverse K-8 school with families of African American, Asian American, Latino, and White, and Appalachian roots. During an after-school program, fieldwork involved teacher candidates supporting participatory action research with youth and the arts.

#### **Emerging Themes**

**“Not entirely sure before about what exactly we would be doing.”** Beyond logistics, additional anxieties persisted. Teacher candidates were a diverse group – some from the city and graduates of Lake’s district, others from inner ring suburbs, others from eastern, western, and southern suburbs. This journal reflected uncertainties and dissonance for being ~~not~~ entirely sure before about what exactly we would be doing.”

Upon walking into Lake, I felt as if I were walking into a prison. It was my first time entering a school which had a metal detector. Stepping into the classroom and sliding the door shut behind me felt as if I were in a jail cell. Then the warden spoke. Turns out, he was no warden at all, at least not from what I could tell. He was the principal of the school, the father, who looked after all of his children. (White female student, 2011)

**“This is a problem . . . it is apparent in our own backyard.”** Teacher candidates were encouraged to analyze



educational problems from multiple angles and apply ecological frameworks to understand how students were located within nested contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This journal entry was from a White male student:

After the past few visits I have noticed how these students' experiences at school are similar to some of the readings we are doing each week in the online part of our course. These are also some of the struggles that many students across the nation face at urban schools . . . . The fact that these problems face some students and not others makes our education system unequal. (White male student, 2010)

This project stretched imaginations of teacher candidates and held great promise for important ingredients in growing prospective teachers. The need for more work connecting conditions of lives of urban middle and high school youth and educators to history and contemporary policy context was evident.

#### **Project #4 - Nurturing Critical Literacy by Mary Gove & Kristine L. Still**

Nurturing Critical Literacy was a multiyear project leading urban teachers in on-site professional development sessions developing Critical Literacy. Urban teachers explored themes of diversity and multiculturalism and ecology through action research.

#### **Emerging Themes**

**Breaking the status quo.** The status quo was expressed by two teachers during a professional development session: each verbalized they would not incorporate books like *The Other Side* by Woodson, telling the story of a possible

friendship between a White girl and an African American girl over a fence separating their yards. Teachers expressed their first and second graders “loved each other” and they did not want to disrupt this perception. A very skilled literacy coach participant explained how she insightfully used *The Other Side* to teach a class of African American children. It was a powerful moment presenting a “new frame” for talking about interactions between culturally diverse groups of people. This emerged from a teacher participant rather than suggested by literacy professors facilitating the session.

**Seeing life through new lenses.** One team used books about children displaced to the U.S. by war specifically, *The Color of Home* by Hoffman and *Angel Child, Dragon Child* by Surat. Teachers reported after reading and discussing each story that it would be valuable to have children from other countries share stories with native born second graders. The native born second graders developed interview questions for students from Kenya and Somalia. Students realized while from different backgrounds they shared similarities. Honesty of student interviewers and interviewees opened barriers and newfound acceptances and understandings flourished.

**Walking through life in others’ shoes.** One team read *Grandfather’s Journey* by Say to a class of special education children. Students did not realize a person could move from one country to another and want to be in both places. Children dialogued about how transient people view things differently than those who stay in one country.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

We used a framework of inter-related dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002; Van Sluys et al., 2006) to cross analyze these four projects.

**Disrupting the commonplace.** In-house research (Thomas-Alexander, 2009) revealed gaps between the mission of our college and negative comments of prospective teachers. Issues emerged when commonplace views of race, culture, gender, and politics were challenged and teaching and research practices examined. Concerns of the college were seen as unpacking the institution's strengths as well as its rigidity, lack of self-examination, and hierarchical relationships.

**Considering multiple viewpoints.** All projects revealed teachers and students struggling to recognize multiple perspectives. Pedagogical challenges encouraging voices of all were central as was nurturing abilities to listen and see others.

**Focusing on the sociopolitical.** All projects focused on the sociopolitical. Helping teachers and students understand educational implications and individual bias through systemic analysis of societal power and privilege has been reported in other studies as researchers, faculty, students, and teachers sometimes constructed insights and colluded to avoid issues (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Marx, 2006).

**Taking action.** The self-study group explored teaching practices and became an action-oriented group by coordinating presentations and workshops emphasizing diversity.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Within each project, discussions highlighted the need for safe learning spaces urging others to critically reflect and interrogate practice. We uncovered a few such participants we called *trailblazers*, working to transform negative, quietly resisting attitudes about urban teaching into energizing,

healthy interactions. These included members of the self-study group examining teaching practices and spearheading initiatives to engage faculty and staff in dialogue, the few prospective and in-service teachers in the *Kidwatching* project incorporating into their lesson plans an understanding of the link between culturally responsive teaching and achievement, the two teachers in the *Nurturing Critical Literacy* study engaging immigrant school mates from Somalia in talking about their experiences before and after coming to the U.S. to break down barriers between children from differing cultures, and the “pioneers” in the *Fieldwork* project hoping and planning to create change.

Each project engaged participants in social action although a few participants held a transformationalist orientation like the trailblazers. Each of the four projects constructed a more sophisticated understanding of cultural diversity, change, and children’s achievement.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper suggested the need for similar cross-college collaborations investigating different aspects of individual institutions from a critical perspective. Living up to mission statements and diversity goals often means change needs to be programmatic and institutional, curricular, and structural. Doing so makes it imperative to have critical and ongoing analyses and dialogues spanning programs which can be mined for insights into challenges and action plans and which provide directions for deep-seated change going beyond the “weakening” of accreditor-approved programs. This collection of projects pinpointed the need to delve further in bringing a critical lens to preparation for prospective and in-service teachers in urban contexts.

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