A Local Solution to a National Problem: Preparing Preservice Candidates for Urban Middle Schools

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Abstract

A midwestern urban school district received a Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) grant from the U.S. Office of Education to deliver specialized middle-level urban teacher preparation. Five colleges and universities and the school district participated in the 5-year project. This article describes the first course in the TQE "urban strand." The course was developed by a committee representing the district and higher education partners and was cotaught at the local community college by a middle school teacher and a teacher educator from a private, 4-year college. Data indicate that cross-institutional course design is viable and that collaborative efforts help teacher educators to understand the local context, stay involved, and establish a credible presence in urban schools.

Introduction

The Holmes Group (1986, 1990, 1995) has advanced the notion that school–university partnerships can lead to simultaneous reform of public schools and teacher education. Urban school districts, in particular, have worked with local universities to develop professional development schools (PDS); in a PDS, preservice candidates are exposed to a culture that includes ongoing professional development and active involvement of university personnel (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2008).

Urban school districts are large, complex organizations with many challenges. The architects of the PDF model anticipated that these sites would be only a small subset of a district's school buildings (Holmes, 1990). With increased pressure to improve achievement for all students, administrators are likely to conclude that the PDS model is too limited to make the progress required by federal and state mandates. Educational leaders must find ways to make rapid and systemwide gains in student achievement in order to avoid sanctions and negative publicity.

If a partnership between a school district and one university holds promise, would a partnership across all of the higher education institutions in a metropolitan area and the city school district be even more promising? Such was the thinking of Gene Harris, superintendent of Columbus, Ohio City Schools, in 2003 when she asked area colleges and universities to form a higher education partnership with the district. Heads of the three private colleges with teacher education programs (Otterbein College, Ohio Dominican University, and Capital University), the local community college (Columbus State Community College), and the flagship state university (the Ohio State University) were 5 of the original 6 institutions that signed a formal agreement to participate in the Higher Education Partnership (HEP). The HEP had a lofty goal; with all of their varying missions, structures, and student populations, the institutions agreed to come together for a common purpose—to narrow the well-documented achievement gap between Columbus Public Schools (CPS) students and their suburban peers.

The HEP received Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) funds from the U.S. Office of Education beginning in 2004 to deliver specialized urban teacher preparation and targeted professional development with a focus on culturally responsive math and science instruction at the middle school level. Through improved teacher recruitment and retention efforts, as well as enhanced coursework for

preservice and in-service teachers, the partnership hoped to chip away at the nagging problem of unacceptable student achievement. One important component was an "urban strand" of courses and field experiences that was to be developed collaboratively, taken by individuals who planned to teach in Columbus Public Schools, and designed to enhance coursework already in place at the 5 higher education institutions.

Not surprisingly, the partners determined that it made sense to begin with an introductory course that included a field experience. What was more surprising, not to mention gratifying, was the non-territorial approach taken by the higher education representatives. A committee representing the 5 higher education partners and the Columbus City Schools was charged with the responsibility of preparing *Introduction to Urban Education*, a course that would receive transfer credit at any of our institutions. The course would be piloted at Columbus State Community College and team-taught by a Columbus Public Schools middle school teacher and a teacher educator from one of the 4-year institutions. Course meetings were scheduled in the evenings and field hour requirements were held to a minimum in order to allow non-traditional students to participate. Higher education partners had determined that daytime course schedules at their respective institutions were barriers for many adults with work and family obligations who would otherwise be suitable prospects for urban teaching. This project afforded us the opportunity to eliminate this barrier and, as a result, attract more diverse candidates.

Grounding *Introduction to Urban Education* in the Professional Literature

During six, 2-hour planning sessions held across the 2005–2006 academic year, representatives from the partner institutions were able to articulate commonalities across teacher education programs. We agreed that candidates enter teacher education programs with thousands of hours spent in classrooms and that we have to make them aware of subconscious assumptions about subject matter, teaching, learning, and the purpose of schooling through coursework and field experiences. We hoped to challenge some or all of these assumptions and to encourage critical reflection. As Weiner (2006) said, the ability to reflect is "valuable for all teachers but it is essential for urban teachers, who are faced with the most morally and politically complex decisions" (p. 19). We identified four themes (Understanding Self, Understanding the Learner, Understanding the Context, and Understanding the Profession) that were central to existing introductory-level courses. What did we need to add to the first course in the "urban strand" to underscore the urban focus? We searched the professional literature to find innovative ideas and promising practices in urban teacher preparation.

Understanding Self

In order to understand others, you need to understand yourself. A corollary of this statement is that, in order to understand individuals from other cultures, you first need to understand your own cultural identity. Narrative inquiry and reflection promote self-understanding in preservice candidates.

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) place autobiography at the personal end of the personal–social continuum of narrative inquiry. Autobiography should transcend storytelling; in order to do so, it must move out of a private space and into a public space. Introspection is important; however, there is reason to believe that analysis is fostered through interaction. Therefore, it is necessary but insufficient to write one's "story" in journals or reflective assignments. Excerpts, critical incidents, or entire autobiographies must be shared. The more diverse and divergent the voices in the community, the more participants will learn from one another.

However, teacher educators must be mindful of the difficulties implicit in carrying on conversations that challenge cherished beliefs or unexamined assumptions and world views. As candidates think about their personal histories, they need to become conscious of the inequalities that exist within society. Obidah and Howard (2005) concluded that teacher educators may be forced into their "uncomfort" zones when biases, prejudices, or emotionally charged opinions surface in

communities of practice. Teacher educators must listen for and react to silence not just words in their classrooms (Mazzei, 2003). Fox (2006) provides a powerful rationale for confronting the topic of race head on in the academy and demonstrates how to engage students in difficult conversations.

It is a widely accepted notion that reflection should be part of every teacher education program. What does it mean to be reflective? Is reflection a "teachable" skill? Hatton and Smith (1994) conclude that though there are no simple answers to these questions, "a powerful strategy for fostering reflective action is to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting the trusted other…" (p. 15). Mentors and supervisors can play a powerful role not only by requiring reflective thinking in candidates but also by modeling reflection for them.

Understanding the Learner

Teacher education candidates are likely to come from backgrounds that are very different than those of the youngsters they will be teaching. Rebecca Goldstein (2004) challenges her readers to separate fact from fiction and to recognize the nuances when answering the question: Who are our urban students and what makes them so "different"? In order to move beyond a simplistic answer to this complex question, candidates need direct experience in urban settings. Banks et al. (2005) argue that teachers need to know "how to inquire into the backgrounds of their students so that they can connect what they learn to their instructional decision making, in a sense becoming anthropologists who explicitly seek to understand their students' cultural practices" (p. 243).

Cultural immersion experiences that ask candidates to move outside of familiar territory (whether for brief or extended time periods) have proved to be effective ways to develop positive dispositions in candidates (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). Placements in nonschool, community-based settings are likely to challenge initial beliefs about urban children and their families if candidates prepare for them by doing some reading in advance and have an opportunity to talk about what they have learned. Obidah and Howard (2005) argue convincingly that "Overall, teacher candidates and beginning teachers know little about the histories and cultures of varying groups in the United States and the discrimination and disenfranchisement that they have encountered" (p. 252). Therefore, before or during these immersion experiences, it is incumbent upon instructors to provide candidates with background information.

In field experiences, we need to make privilege visible to our candidates, even if it means entering into that "uncomfort" zone. Leland and Harste (2005) describe an interesting assignment that encourages candidates to compare their personal histories with those of their students. They asked candidates in an urban teaching cohort to write a personal memoir and to select one student in the field setting to do so as well. "We then asked our students to analyze the two memoirs in terms of the evidence of privilege in each one" (p. 71). While candidates described in this article sometimes reacted defensively to the assignment, it did cause many to "interrogate their underlying assumption that poor people deserve the problems they have" (p. 62).

Understanding the Context

What makes an urban setting different than a rural or suburban setting? Kincheloe (2004) identifies the following distinguishing characteristics: 1) Schools are located in densely populated areas with ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic diversity as well as significant numbers of families who fall below the poverty line; 2) schools and school districts tend to be large, bureaucratic, and politicized; 3) students within urban areas are likely to be mobile (as are teachers and administrators); 4) teachers are unlikely to live in the communities in which they work; and 5) districts face challenging transportation issues.

Community mapping (Sears, 1998) is a technique that helps candidates develop a better understanding of urban neighborhoods. Participants walk around the area surrounding a school, take photographs, interview residents or individuals who live or work in the community, look at local newspapers, and visit police stations, fire stations, religious institutions, and community centers. Through systematic data gathering, candidates identify resources and increase their awareness of physical and structural challenges that manifest themselves as social problems.

Marble (1997) used a school "portrait" assignment to help preservice teachers gain an appreciation for how complex it can be to understand the context of even one school. It was an open-ended assignment that asked individuals to work together in collaborative groups to prepare and present an investigation on their school. Groups had to define their own projects. Marble included the following exemplars in his article: one group that focused on student perspectives; a second that began with an external viewpoint on school reform; and a third that looked at teachers' implementation of new teaching strategies. Marble concluded that "regardless of approach, all of the candidates had to wrestle with appropriate and context-sensitive ways to share their findings with school personnel. They came to see the school not as one-dimensional but as an extremely complex institution" (p. 63).

Understanding the Profession

There is theoretical as well as empirical evidence to support the conclusion that general characteristics associated with effective teaching are necessary but insufficient for preparing successful urban educators, and that urban teacher education programs need to be mindful of the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997). These tenets include high expectations, a positive perspective on parents and families, cultural sensitivity, use of methods that encourage active learning, and sociopolitical awareness.

Preservice candidates committed to working in urban settings need to ground their work in the ethical dimension of teaching (Strom, 1989). Ladson-Billings (2001) describes how teachers can be encouraged to develop sociopolitical consciousness in themselves and in their students. Culturally responsive teachers, according to Ladson-Billings, promote this consciousness through knowledge of the larger school-community-nation-world context, a strong sense of civic responsibility, a desire to provide experiences that stimulate their students to think about the broader social context, and a realization that their well-being is intimately tied to the progress their students make. Therefore, a desire for social justice should be a key disposition for those entering the teaching profession, particularly for those who choose to work in urban schools. The technical aspects of teaching matter little if this underlying principle is forgotten.

What type of person is most likely to be a culturally responsive educator? Haberman (1995, 1996), based on thousands of interviews with and observations of the 5–8% of teachers in urban school districts who are deemed to be highly effective by virtue of student performance, peer review, supervisory evaluations, and self-assessment, concluded that there are definable traits that characterize "star teachers." He argues that star teachers in urban schools demonstrate persistence, a protective stance toward learners and learning, a positive attitude toward students, a desire to continue to improve, a sense of efficacy, resourcefulness (and the ability to avoid burnout), and an acceptance of human fallibility in themselves and others.

Integration of Central Themes into Course Design

After a thorough review of the professional literature, the design committee determined that there was no "right" answer to the question of how best to prepare teachers for urban classrooms and that *Introduction to Urban Education* had to be conceptualized as a work in progress. We concluded that it is important for the college/university supervisors, mentor teachers, and candidates to work together to develop their own answers to what works best. While we anticipated that the paths taken would be unique to the individuals involved, we did have a common destination: culturally responsive pedagogy. Star teachers who are culturally responsive do not fall into the trap of the "pedagogy of poverty" and are likely, despite difficult circumstances, to generate positive energy in their classrooms and their buildings (Haberman, 1991). We explicitly included the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and star teacher traits in classroom discussion, readings, and field assignments.

Method

Purpose of the Study

The first iteration of *Introduction to Urban Education* was conceptualized as a design experiment. Design studies in education "involve orchestrating all aspects of a period of daily life in classrooms" (Brown, 1992, p. 141). Data collected on curriculum, instruction, and assessment across the term would inform planning not only for the introductory course but for all courses in the strand. The design experiment focused on two research questions:

1) Can an introductory course focused on culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997) and "star teacher" attributes (Haberman, 1995, 1996) help preservice candidates to think critically about the challenges and possibilities that exist within urban schools?
2) Will preservice candidates be able to translate what they learn from class activities into culturally responsive behaviors in their first field assignments?

Instructors

The authors agreed to coteach *Introduction to Urban Education*. We were a study in contrasts: Harriet—a Caucasian, middle-aged female, a product of private schools and Ivy League universities, with 7 years of teaching experience in an affluent New York suburb and 25 years in teacher education at a small, church-related college; and Isha—an African American, 29-year-old female, a product of Columbus City Schools and The Ohio State University, with 7 years of work in the district (5 years as a middle school science teacher and 2 years as a teacher assigned to the TQE project).

By taking on the coteaching assignment, we were embarking into uncharted territory. Nevin, Thousand, and Villa (2009), in their review of the professional literature, found that empirical studies of coteaching in teacher education are "relatively sparse" (p. 572). There is some evidence that collaborative teaching improves practice for each of the coteachers. Questions about the impact of coteaching on student learning in particular, or on teacher education reform in general, are still unanswered.

We met weekly for 10 weeks prior to the first class. Every week, Harriet provided material that gave Isha an orientation to the academy in general and teacher education in particular. Isha shared best practices in urban education from Web sites, in-service sessions, and practical

texts; in addition, she brought in magazines and films that portrayed urban youth culture. While the overt agenda was to structure individual class sessions, our real purpose was to get to know each other. Like Jennifer Obidah and Karen Teel (2001), teacher researchers who confronted race and culture in a head-on fashion, we needed to learn each other's "herstory" (p. 9). We talked about our family and school experiences as well as our teacher preparation programs. Harriet was the 1960s idealist who had participated in civil rights marches and wanted to believe that social and economic inequalities could be addressed through school improvement efforts. Isha was the 1990s realist who had come up through "the system" and was skeptical about the possibility of realizing the promise of democracy for all children in poverty. What we shared in common was a sense of humor and a sincere interest in learning from and with each other.

Participants

The course was open to any individual who was eligible for a TQE-funded scholarship. Scholarships of up to $5,000 per year were offered to qualified individuals at partner institutions who expressed an interest in teaching mathematics or science at the middle level in Columbus City Schools. We started out with 15 students but lost 3 by the 2nd week due to work and family conflicts, and a 4th at the midterm point because of poor academic performance. The 11 (2 African American females, 2 African American males, 1 African female, 1 Caucasian male, 4 Caucasian females, 1 Hispanic female) were, with one exception, non-traditional students who ranged in age from 30 to 58. Two were instructional aides in Columbus Schools, one was teaching in a charter school under an emergency license, and two were childcare providers. During the first class, we administered the *Teaching in Urban Schools Scale* (Swartz & Bakari, 2007), an assessment device designed to tap "knowledge about effective teaching in urban schools" (p. ii). The class as a whole scored slightly below the mean reported in the manual (Mean = 0.62, SD = 0.14). Individual scores as well as the class mean are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Performance on Teaching in Urban Schools *Scale*

Candidate	Total Score
AB	0.67
HB	0.69
JB	0.44
JC	0.53
JG	0.71
SH	0.66
BK	0.55
KN	0.65
KR	0.58
LW	0.50
SW	0.52
Mean	0.59
SD	0.09

Note: Total score represents the proportion of items that a candidate answered correctly.

Course Structure

Course content was framed by the following overarching questions: What are the political, social, and historical forces that shape educational institutions? What current standards, legislation, and code of ethics guide the work of teachers? Who are the students that populate our schools and how can teachers address the needs of all learners? How do culture and community impact teaching and learning? How does one become socialized in this profession? Can I make a significant contribution to the profession? Can I be an effective urban teacher?

The class met for 3 hours 1 night per week over a 10-week period. Note that 2 of the 3 hours were dedicated to the six course topics identified by the Ohio Board of Regents as essential for introduction to education courses (Standards-Based Education, Professionalism, Diversity, Democratic Issues/Social Justice, Curriculum and Instruction, and Legal/Organizational Issues). Each topic was covered by a student team one week and a professional panel the following week. Candidates were divided into collaborative learning groups, assigned one of the themes, provided with relevant Web links, and given the task of putting together a 45–60 minute lesson on their topic. Panels composed of 3 or more Columbus Public Schools administrators, teacher leaders, and union representatives were given 60 minutes to talk about the district's approach to each of the six topics; students could ask panel members questions and engage them in extended conversations. The remaining hour was focused on activities that underscored the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and allowed candidates to make connections between field observations and course content.

In the syllabus, we indicated that candidates should try to schedule 20–25 clock hours in a Columbus middle school. During the school-based field experience, candidates were expected to learn about classroom routines, take over some nonteaching duties, tutor individual students, or work with small groups. Isha, in her role as TQE mentor coordinator, arranged the school-based placements. Mentors were exemplary math and science teachers who had been selected to work not only with preservice candidates but also with teachers in their buildings who had between 2 and 5 years of experience and were interested in improving their practice. Mentors received intensive training in ten sessions across the academic year on topics that ranged from instructional improvement (understanding the young adolescent, culturally responsive pedagogy, differentiation, classroom management), to personal and professional development (teacher career development, stress management), to specific mentoring skills (cognitive coaching, teacher leadership, communication styles).

An additional 20–25 hours were spent working in an afterschool or weekend program that served urban young adolescents. Candidates were given a list of agencies throughout the metropolitan area that welcomed volunteers with a description of programs offered, application procedures, and contact information. Working in educational or recreational settings, they recorded differences between behaviors observed in the community versus the school setting and capitalized on opportunities to form relationships with one or more of the young adolescents they encountered.

Key Assessments

Response paper. Candidates located examples of culturally responsive teaching behaviors in *Holler If You Hear Me* (Michie, 1999), a 1st-year teacher's memoir. They were asked to complete a reading guide that listed the five tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (high expectations, positive perspective on parents, cultural sensitivity, promoting active learning,

and sociopolitical awareness) with two to four indicators per tenet. For example, the following indicators were listed under "High Expectations": *1) The teacher presumes that all students are capable of being educated;* and *2) the teacher gives students clear messages about what it means to be successful in his classroom.* Candidates read the memoir, found examples of the indicators, and noted page numbers on the guide. In small groups, they shared their findings with one another. Each candidate was then asked to write his or her own response paper, addressing the tenets by using examples from the Michie memoir.

Community mapping. After completing a community mapping exercise in the neighborhood surrounding the school in which they had been placed, candidates were asked to respond in writing to the following prompt: *What information did you acquire that you could use if you were planning instruction for young adolescents who lived in this community? Can you see ways that you could make linkages between school and community?*

Participant observation in field settings. Using a structured protocol, candidates observed young adolescents in school and community settings and described their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive characteristics. We gave candidates a handout that outlined developmental characteristics of young adolescents (Van Hoose, Strahan, & L'Esperance, 2002) and required them to find specific examples of these characteristics in middle school youngsters encountered in their field settings. We also gave them a handout, entitled "Culture of Their Daily Lives," that asked specific questions about language, fashion, music, religion/spirituality, food, media/technology, and recreation/leisure. They were to observe, interview, and conduct research in order to answer questions related to these topics.

Star teacher assignment. Candidates looked for "star teacher" attributes in their mentor teachers and jotted down anecdotes that provided direct or indirect evidence of the presence or absence of one or more of these attributes.

Group project. Each of the six course topics was assigned to a group of 3 to 5 candidates. Groups taught a 45–60 minute lesson that highlighted key aspects of the topics. Groups were expected to incorporate PowerPoint slides, a handout, and a follow-up activity. Each member of a group was assessed by the other members for his/her contributions; this feedback, in combination with the quality of the final product, factored into the project grade.

Synthesis paper. At the end of the course, candidates were asked to respond to the following prompt: *Read and react to* Urban Teaching: The Essentials *(Weiner, 2006). Reviewing everything that you have learned in this course, what valid points does the author make? What ideas would you debate with her? You can consider this assignment to be your final examination for the course. Demonstrate what you have learned from assigned readings, class discussions, student and expert panel presentations, and field experiences.*

Data Sources

In addition to key assessments, data sources included instructors' field notes and mentor teacher observations/ratings. The committee took three of the five tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997) and translated them into a rubric that could be used both as a way to communicate expectations and as a tool to assess candidate performance in field settings. The following categories, with behavioral descriptors of exemplary, adequate, and substandard performance, were included: high expectations, cultural sensitivity, and use of methods that encourage active learning.

Data Analysis

We used both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. Descriptive statistics on key assessments and field evaluation ratings were computed for the 11 candidates. However, we anticipated that there would be little that we could glean "from the numbers" that would inform future course design. By coding our field notes and candidates' final synthesis papers using the four themes identified by the committee and grounded in the professional literature (understanding self, learners, context, and the profession), we were able to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the impact of specific design elements on candidate learning.

Findings

Descriptive statistics on the six key assessments are provided in Table 2. Acceptable ratings indicated that an assignment addressed all required elements, included thorough explanations and/or salient examples, and was free of mechanical errors. Exemplary ratings meant that submissions were insightful as well as thorough. One candidate distinguished herself by earning exemplary ratings on all six assessments; in contrast, another candidate, because his work was either late or incomplete, had marginal ratings on four of the six. While there was variability in the quality across individuals and assignments, in general, candidates were able to demonstrate competence on the six assessments.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics on Key Assessments

Assessment	Possible Points	Obtained Range	M	SD
Michie guide	10	4–10	8.09	1.58
Field observation	10	7–10	8.82	0.96
Star teacher interview	10	4–10	8.73	1.79
Weiner summative essay	20	14–20	16.64	1.80
Community mapping	10	6–10	8.82	1.33
Group presentation	40	33–38	36.00	1.55

Table 3 shows frequency distributions of ratings on field evaluations. Nine of the 11 candidates were judged by mentor teachers to be performing at exemplary or expected levels on all three tenets. It is noteworthy that the individual who earned an "Unsatisfactory" on "Cultural Sensitivity" also had the lowest score in the class on the *Teaching in Urban Schools* measure administered at the beginning of the course. One young woman (BK) had "Marginal" ratings on all three criteria. She seemed to have a particularly hard time relating to urban adolescents; her own reflections corroborate the mentor ratings (see BK excerpt in *Understanding Self: Getting into the "Uncomfort Zone"*).

Table 3
Frequencies: Field Evaluation Ratings

Criterion	Description	Ratings [a]			
		4	3	2	1
High expectations	Committed to helping all young adolescents develop confidence and competence	9	1	1	0
Cultural sensitivity	Seeks out background information about cultures and communities in order to enhance interactions	7	2	1	1
Active learning	Encourages young adolescents to be active participants in teaching, tutoring, or recreational contexts	9	1	1	0

Note: 4 = Exceeds expectations; 3 = Meets expectations; 2 = Marginal; 1 = Unsatisfactory
[a] N=11

Instructor field notes, mentor comments on field evaluations, and candidate work samples were analyzed and coded using the four course themes as categories. Qualitative findings are reported by theme.

Understanding Self: Getting into the "Uncomfort Zone"
We asked the class to respond to reflective prompts in weekly journal assignments. We planned to have candidates share their responses regularly throughout the term in small-group or whole-class activities. Because the class had diverse and divergent voices, we were sure there would be many opportunities for candidates to learn from one another.

Instructors' field notes from the first class documented the difficulties implicit in carrying on conversations that challenge cherished beliefs or unexamined assumptions and world views. In a fishbowl activity taken from Fox (2006), students were asked to sit either in the outer or inner circle depending on their skin color. The inner circle responded to the question: *What impact does race have on your daily life*? Those in the outer circle were asked to be silent observers. We intended to have the circles switch roles after 15 minutes and started with the students of color in the inner circle. What we had not anticipated was the conflict that would arise between an African American male and a Somali female. The animosity was palpable, and Caucasian students in the outer circle looked on in stunned silence. As instructors, we needed to decide whether to intercede. We reminded participants about the "rules" of civil discourse, but we allowed the two to share their perspectives. Once they finished speaking, other candidates of color told their stories. One woman in her late 20s talked about taunts experienced in middle school and high school because she was viewed as "yellow" (or light-skinned) and, therefore, not part of the African American community. A young African woman, still an adolescent, described how Caucasian teachers expected less of her because of her dark skin, even though she consistently earned good grades and all members of her immediate family were college educated.

After 45 minutes, Caucasian students took their place in the inner circle. We heard from a young man who felt more comfortable in a predominantly African American high school than he did when his parents moved him to a Caucasian suburban community. We also heard from

middle-aged as well as young adults who commented about the fact that they had not really thought about race very much, certainly not about their own racial identity.

We landed in the "uncomfort zone" described by Obidah and Howard (2005) very quickly. We wanted students to be able to share their experiences but needed to ensure that individuals with limited English skills were not overwhelmed by their more verbally facile peers. We had to interpret silence (Mazzei, 2003) not just words to gauge the emotional temperature in the room and encourage the more reticent students to engage in the discussion. That first class was both exhausting and exhilarating. It certainly set the stage for the rest of the term.

Understanding the Learner: Connecting to Middle School Young Adolescents

Candidates were to learn about intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral development through careful observation. One candidate came to the realization that urban adolescents posed unique challenges to adults.

At first, I did not think that going to another school was important. (Note: Candidate is an instructional assistant in a Columbus elementary building). *However, I quickly found the differences between elementary and middle schools. A small child is moldable, easily swayed and changed. The adolescent is a whole different being. They take exception to almost everything an adult says to them. I learned that teaching an adolescent involves different approaches and that all children are reachable if you care enough to dig your way in. I feel that to be an effective middle school educator you have to have real connection with your students. You can not only go through the motions or they will realize you are fake. And then watch out!* (KN, Caucasian, female, non-traditional student)

Establishing relationships was easier for some than for others. KR (Caucasian, female, non-traditional student) expressed frustration in her synthesis paper.

I wish that I could say that I have seen powerful examples of being able to learn from students in my field experience or in my community setting... But I cannot say that I have. I attempted in a small way to connect with the students; nevertheless, it is difficult since often you are trying to get them do something they do not want to do—work or study.

Candidates were struck by the developmental variability among the students and often taken aback by middle school youth culture. Instructor field notes recorded frequent discussions of candidates' own experiences as young adolescents. Many concluded that language and actions that were unacceptable in their youth might be the norm for the students they encountered.

This was true for the youngest as well as the oldest class participants. In fact, BK (African, female, traditional student) found herself particularly "out of synch" with urban middle school students. She was taken aback by students in her school setting. She talked in class about being called "an Oreo" (assumedly because she was perceived to be an African American woman speaking and carrying herself in a Caucasian manner). Her classroom conversation and written reflections focused on students' disrespect for adults. On the final evaluation form, TR (African American, female, mentor teacher), described BK's interactions with students in the following manner:

There was an obvious wall between her and the students. BK did express to me some preconceived negative behavioral views that she held. For example, she was told that inner city kids were hard to teach and would display inappropriate behaviors.

Understanding the Context: Becoming a Novice Anthropologist

Candidates were required to look systematically at physical and social aspects of communities that surrounded the schools to which they had been assigned. They described abandoned dwellings, empty storefronts, and other signs of economic distress. KN (Caucasian, female, non-traditional student) observed:

There was a "park" located within walking distance of the school. The area of the park was approximately 100 feet wide by a length of 1½ city blocks. While this may sound large, it was not. The area was bordered by two residential streets. The park area had trees and an uneven grassy area, caused by the higher level of one of the bordering streets. There was very little for any child to do at this park. It was not a good place to run, ride a bike, or even play in since the ground was uneven…. Some things that I learned while I was walking around this neighborhood included that the students had few opportunities on which to focus their efforts, creativity, and strengths. Thus, their attempts at creativity show up in the surrounding area as graffiti. One can only wonder as to what the surrounding community would be like with extensive resources for the youth.

Walking around the community surrounding her school, SH (Caucasian, female, non-traditional student) noted the presence of new immigrant groups in Columbus and was reminded of her ethnocentric response when her neighborhood began to change:

I live on the west side of Columbus where it is cheaper and still on the bus line. At some point, I noticed more and more people wearing headdresses or with a red dot on their foreheads. A Mexican family moved into the apartment next to mine with 12 people—6 adults and 6 kids. I felt surrounded and was unsure how to react. My first thought was, "For heaven's sake, speak English!" I wanted to reject the foreign culture and didn't want to hear Spanish, which is probably exactly how they felt about American culture.

Candidates became keenly aware of the fact that school culture is likely to mirror the culture of the community. Urban ills (violence, sense of futility, transience, overcrowding, and inadequate resources) have a significant impact on the lives of teachers and their students. SW (Hispanic, female, non-traditional student) drew the conclusion in her final synthesis paper that teachers in high-poverty schools face unique challenges:

Sometimes teachers need to help students with their supplies and clothing because parents do not have enough money to buy them. There is a direct connection between community and school. If the community is poor that means that the school is poor.

Disrespectful and volatile behaviors perplexed and disturbed candidates:

Students who really weren't into learning generally would come to class after the tardy bell had rung. They would continue to disrupt class with constant talking to classmates or with comments directed at the teacher. Or instead, they would put their heads down on the desk and sleep the class

away. How do you motivate students who choose not to challenge themselves? (JB, African American, male, non-traditional student)

He kept telling me that his mom would beat me up or take care of me. Mr. A. told him to sit down. The child argued and then accused the teacher of cussing at him. On that day, I was disheartened and knew that I had definitely hit the brick wall that many educators face. (KN, Caucasian, female, non-traditional student)

AB (African American, female, non-traditional student) felt the negative energy in her building and reflected on it in her final synthesis paper:

I have walked down the hallways of my school and listened in the staff lounge. I've heard harsh comments about students that were blatantly blurted out during a typical staff lunch and wondered what may have happened to cause an educator to respond in this manner.

Understanding the Profession: Looking Through the CRP Lens

There is consensus around the notion that teachers should be able to translate knowledge about themselves, their students, and the larger social and political forces that shape our institutions into effective teaching practices (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert et al., 2005). *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students*, a memoir by Greg Michie (1999) about his early years as a middle school teacher in Chicago schools, was assigned as a springboard for discussion about what culturally responsive teaching might look in a novice teacher's classroom. In reflective journal entries, class participants applauded Michie's ability to connect to his students by selecting multicultural texts, using learner-centered strategies, and capitalizing on teachable moments. Michie's "passion for his students," in the words of one candidate, was inspiring. In chapter after chapter, he provided examples of how he worked tirelessly during and after the school day to engage his students.

I am confident that Michie had days that he was frustrated and even angry. However, what I found to be extraordinarily encouraging was how he persevered until he located a common thread that allowed him to build trust… (AB, African American, female, non-traditional student)

Candidates witnessed "star teachers" in their field assignments who, like Michie, persevered. Two candidates recognized that cultural responsiveness translates into a "whatever it takes" attitude toward teaching.

Mrs. D. uses the curriculum guide, but she is able to recognize immediately if the children do not understand the topic. She will try an assortment of activities to help the children understand. (JC, Caucasian, male, non-traditional student)

She spends time during her lunch time and before and after class hours to explain some theory that they did not understand. (SW, Hispanic female, non-traditional student)

One candidate documented her first attempts to be a "star" teacher:

In one of my sessions at the Homework Help Center, a student was struggling to write a complaint letter to the manager about a recent restaurant experience (a required homework assignment). He was struggling because he had never been to a restaurant, not even fast food. I encouraged him to think about his family's meals at home and asked him probing questions about things that could go wrong... He was able to come up with several possible complaints, but it made me realize that everyone does not share some experiences I take for granted. (SH, Caucasian, female, non-traditional student)

As a culminating assignment, *Introduction to Urban Education* candidates were asked to read *Urban Teaching: The Essentials* (Weiner, 2006) and react to the text by comparing the author's ideas with what they heard in student and panel presentations, saw in their school settings, and read about in other readings. Weiner provides a candid, often critical, view of urban schools, with particular attention paid to New York City schools. Did their impressions match up with those expressed by the author?

Weiner seems to be very negative toward administration and other staff members in inner city schools. I got the feeling that she is preparing new teachers to fight a war. She made it seem like colleagues would not be any more help than administrators would...My experience this quarter seemed to be a different scenario altogether. The teachers were very helpful even before they knew I was just a student...The principal was accessible to the staff...The administration and staff appeared to support one another. (JG, Caucasian, female, non-traditional student)

Indifference toward students on the part of many urban educators, while observed by some of the candidates and highlighted in the Wiener text, might as easily be found in suburban districts, according to one participant.

Rather than analyzing what the school and teachers can do differently to help underachieving students succeed, too many teachers say "these kids" can't learn because "these families don't care." I agree with Weiner on this. However, I can't say that this happens only in urban schools. I have heard this type of comment from a teacher with years of experience and from a brand new teacher in a well-regarded suburban district. Teachers who make these kinds of statements just don't want to put in the extra effort needed to find a way to bring a particular child around. (KB, Caucasian, female, non-traditional student)

Weiner painted a grim picture of the plight of immigrants and English language learners in urban schools. JC, a Caucasian, non-traditional male student, found Weiner's assertion that immigrant populations are "short changed" (p. 9) to be untrue in Columbus.

Before EDUC 210, I would have jumped to the conclusion that a student with limited English skills should not be in regular classes. Thanks to the Diversity Expert Panel and Group Presentation, I learned there are several programs in place not only to help these children while in the classroom but assessments that they have to pass before they enter regular classrooms. I am not saying these programs are perfect, but it is a step in the right direction.

Columbus resources and expertise were showcased across the term by the panels. One participant noted the stark contrast between district schools and the inner-city charter school in which she taught.

Urban schools offer inadequate school supplies and resources ... I'll pause right here to elaborate from personal experience. Teaching at Confusing Academy has confirmed this statement for me and several other points Weiner has elaborated on throughout the chapters of her book. When I first arrived at Confusing Academy I was given no planning time to prepare myself for the class I was to be teaching. I started off being told I was assigned to 6th grade English only to be told 1 week later I would be placed in the 1st grade. When I came into the 1st grade class there were no books, no supplemental materials, no school supplies, no fun posters, and no computer! My thoughts were: TEACH! TEACH WHAT? WITH WHAT? (HB, African American, female, non-traditional student)

Looking Back and Looking Forward

As teacher educators, we wanted to instill a sense of efficacy that would counterbalance our natural tendency "to notice and attend to those negative things in our environment that bother us, challenge the status quo or present a perceived threat" (Jongewaard, 2004, p. 15). We emphasized reflection because we believed that "Reflective practitioners understand the challenge and appreciate the complexity. They recognize and appreciate the stacked odds. Nevertheless, reflective teachers start with the possible" (Jongewaard, 2004, p. 17).

Based on data collected during exit conferences and from online course evaluations, participants felt that the course, particularly the field component, had been a positive learning experience. Though all of our candidates indicated that they wanted to continue in a teacher education program, we had serious reservations about one (who happened to be the individual who had the lowest score on the *Teaching in Urban Schools Scale* at the beginning of the course) and concerns about several others. The candidates about whom we felt least comfortable were either unwilling or unable to look carefully or critically at their own actions and reactions. They often came up with simplistic explanations for complex phenomena or were unaware of contradictions that surfaced in their written reflections and verbal interchanges. In addition to assessments completed by mentor teachers, we shared our impressions, both orally and in writing during exit conferences; written records would follow candidates as they transferred from the community college to a 4-year institution. We used the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework for providing feedback.

Encouraged by the positive student response to the course, but disappointed by the fact that we had ended up with a small number of candidates who we felt had the potential to be strong urban teachers, we asked ourselves what we could do differently in the future. Could we predict who our future "star" teachers would be before they began the course? Unfortunately, we couldn't. Class activities and field requirements allowed us to identify promising candidates, but background variables (including age, ability, experience, and ethnicity) were not good predictors of success. We ended up with more questions than answers about how to recruit individuals with the "right stuff" for urban schools.

Our experience in this first course taught us that it is possible to transcend institutional boundaries. Greater trust and cooperation among higher education partners led to a cross-institutional program for in-service Columbus teachers who wish to add math or science

middle-level licensure. In addition, committee members who had been instrumental in designing the first course requested that we establish a professional learning community for individuals interested in enhancing their understanding of urban education. We launched this learning community during the 2008–2009 academic year; 10 college/university faculty and supervisors, 6 Columbus City schools faculty and administrators, and 6 preservice candidates participated in monthly meetings. Participants have expressed an interest in continuing the learning community, despite the fact that funds are no longer available to purchase reading materials or to cover refreshments.

In order to prepare teachers to work effectively in an urban district, teacher educators should understand how historical, sociological, and political forces play out at the local level. As several of our students pointed out to us in their final papers, cities are as different from one another as they are from suburbs or small towns. The term *urban* has a different meaning in Columbus, Ohio, than it does in New York, Chicago, or even Cincinnati and Cleveland, cities in the same state. Because cities are dynamic places and change continually, the only way to understand the local context is to stay involved and establish a credible presence within the school district. The TQE project has given the higher education partners a powerful opportunity to redesign teacher preparation in collaboration with one another and with a large urban school district.

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