

Crossing Borders without Leaving Town:
The Impact of Cultural Immersion
on the Perceptions of Teacher Education Candidates

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The racial/ethnic populations in public schools have changed dramatically in recent years and will continue to shift to a majority non-White population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). In 2001, 61% of school-aged children in the United States were White; this percentage decreased to 56% by 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) and it is projected that by 2035 students of color will be the majority (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, the number of students of color served by urban school districts is disproportionately high. The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reports 67.3% of the student population in urban districts is composed of students of color. Yet, the population of teachers in the United States is 83% White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), the majority of whom are from middle class English-only backgrounds (Amatea, 2009). These differing life experiences can create borders between students and their teachers. Often, White teachers will interpret differences in life experiences, cultural frames of reference, race, class, and gender as a deficit on the part of students, which leads to inequitable educational opportunities for our nation's children.

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The changing demographics within our schools create an immediate need for teacher preparation programs to better prepare all teachers for the diversity that exists within our schools. Several recommendations for teacher preparation call for opportunities for teacher candidates to cross cultural borders and gain a broad and deep understanding of urban students. Recommendations include opportunities to get to know their students outside of school and opportunities to work and socialize within the urban community (Cooper, 2007; Gay, 2004; Haberman, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Weiner, 1999; Zeichner, 2003). Teacher candidates' perceptions of both urban schools and K-12 students can be positively changed by experience (Cooper, 2007). Through direct experience of other cultures, teacher candidates can begin knowing students fully and gain a broad understanding of cultural diversity (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Grant, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Weiner, 1999).

This article focuses on one elementary teacher education program that has responded to the call from the literature by redesigning teacher preparation specifically for urban schools. Like many urban areas across the country, the Midwestern city in which the university is located has failing school systems, racially segregated communities, and socioeconomic divides between the inner city and outlying communities (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2011). The population of the county is 70% White and the central city population is 61% White (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). However, the population of the city school district is composed of 91.3% students of color (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). Likewise, while only 15.4% of people in the county live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009), 25% of the children in the city school district live in poverty and 80.3% of the students in the district qualify for free and/or reduced lunch (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2011).

These cultural barriers create borders between urban students and the teacher candidates in the elementary education program under study. Similar to the demographics of teacher education nationwide, the program candidates are primarily White. Over the last two years, the population of the program has consisted of approximately 100 candidates. Within this population, 62% of candidates were White, 38% of the candidates were of color, and 14% of the candidates were male. The cultural borders that exist between candidate and student highlight the need for teacher candidates to gain a broad understanding of urban communities, cultural diversity, and the role schools and communities have on the educational opportunities for urban youth. Candidates need to learn how to cross borders and examine schools, their own backgrounds,

the educational system, and how the intersection of these factors will manifest in their future classrooms.

Candidates within the program are aware of these borders between their backgrounds and the urban community. One candidate stated:

Those of us that grew up in the [city] area were taught that there were certain parts of the city that one just didn't venture into.

Another candidate described her perception at the beginning of her program:

I am honestly not used to places in [city] beyond [named] Road...you always hear bad things about [named street]. This is where many of the placements are [for this class]. I honestly freaked out.

Theoretical Framework

The teacher education program is committed to preparing candidates for the global diversity extant in our nation's schools, with a specific focus on the complex nature of teaching in urban environments. The two-year curriculum is heavily field- and experience-based (Dewey, 1938) and grounded in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978): candidates are exposed to multiple experiences and are encouraged to consider the cultural and societal context of schooling as they form their identities as teachers. Candidates in the program are immersed in experiences, readings, and dialogue designed to assist them in constructing knowledge regarding their identities as teachers and their perceptions of teaching in urban schools. Candidates are encouraged to question their reality and adapt their understanding of self and of education as experiences change (Noddings, 1990; von Glasersfeld, 1990). During the first year of the professional program, candidates enroll in courses pertaining to cultural diversity and social justice, while participating in field experiences in urban schools. During the second year of the professional program, candidates take courses in working with families and communities, integrated curriculum, differentiated teaching strategies, and culturally responsive pedagogy. In conjunction with the second year courses, candidates enroll in a closely supervised year-long internship.

The curricular experiences discussed in this article enlist Vico's construction of knowledge in that candidates are immersed in experiences that cause them to reconsider past judgments, beliefs, and understandings of reality (as cited in Bergin & Fisch, 1948). Candidates examine how the social context has influenced current reality. Through this process, candidates redefine what is familiar and, therefore, redefine their understanding of urban communities and their identities as teachers.

Program Design

Project ACCESS (Accessing Community Collaborations to Enhance Student Success) is a three-part course sequence layered within the program and originating from a grant funded through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Courses in Project ACCESS include “Summer Community Immersion,” “Working with Families and Communities,” and the “Student Teaching Internship.” Each of these experiences provides candidates with multiple opportunities to step outside of their comfort zones and cross cultural, racial, and linguistic borders to further understand the students they will teach and gain an understanding of themselves as cultural beings in the classroom. This article describes the programmatic features and results of a study that examined the impact of two courses, “Community Immersion” and “Working with Families and Communities,” on candidates’ perceptions of teaching in urban communities.

Summer Community Immersion

The “Summer Community Immersion” was designed to help candidates gain a better understanding of themselves as teachers in urban schools, gain a better understanding of the urban community including its challenges and resources, and develop a deep understanding of the experiences of the students and families with whom they will work. The course occurs after the first year of the program, during the summer semester preceding the year-long internship experience.

The course was designed in collaboration with community agencies through forums and focus group conversations taking place over the course of one year. Members of community agencies were asked to share their thoughts and experiences regarding the preparation of teachers for urban schools. The prevailing themes from these focus group discussions were a need for teachers to be aware of the strengths of the urban community and to be more cognizant of the experiences of students and families. The course was born out of the ideas and suggestions of this group, namely the need for prospective teachers to gain an understanding of the communities in which they work as well as to gain a level of comfort and familiarity in recognizing and crossing the borders within the city.

In this experiential field-based course, candidates spend eight weeks immersed in the community with opportunities to experience the urban context, including both its problems and its social capital; reflect on their own backgrounds, experiences, and potential biases; and explore the roles they will assume as a teacher in an urban school. Further, the experience provides opportunities for candidates to explore tangible community problems and how they are addressed, as well as problem-solve

scenarios that represent the experiences of urban students, families, and teachers. Course activities include course readings and discussions, guest speakers, field trips and simulations, neighborhood excursions, service learning, and summer internships.

Course readings are designed to help candidates engage in discussions pertaining to issues of racialization, segregation, and marginalization of urban communities. Candidates read excerpts from McIntosh's (1988) *White Privilege*, Gotham's (2002) *Race, Real Estate, and Unequal Development*, and Haberman's (1991) *Pedagogy of Poverty*. Guest speakers from the urban community are selected in an effort to help broaden candidates' knowledge of experiences of urban youth and the resources available within urban communities. Throughout the two summers this course has been offered, speakers have included former gang members, pastors, and directors of community agencies.

Course field trips are also designed to assist candidates in learning more about the urban community. Candidates participate in simulations and problem solving such as completing daily tasks without transportation. Neighborhood excursions provide an avenue for candidates to examine challenges as well as strengths of the communities. Candidates tour grocery stores to discover differences in resources in varying locations and conduct walking neighborhood tours in areas where invisible borders exist.

Finally, visits and service descriptions within various community agencies that serve children and families in the urban core provide the opportunity for candidates to discover the richness of resources available within the community. Candidates have served food at the Salvation Army, volunteered at child development centers, and participated in honk-and-holler feeding of the homeless in inner city neighborhoods.

Each candidate also spends five-to-10 hours each week (outside of class time) working as unpaid interns in a community agency. In their 40-to-80 total hours of community agency work, candidates are exposed to the vast network of not-for-profit agencies supporting students and families in the urban core.

Working with Families and Communities

The "Working with Families and Communities" course was designed to build upon the experiences and understandings gained from the "Community Immersion" through focusing on the school community within the larger urban context. The purpose of the course is to provide a variety of experiences that lead to meaningful opportunities that can increase candidates' comfort level and ability to develop culturally responsive strategies for collaborating with students, their families, and respec-

tive communities. This course occurs during the first semester of the internship year, preceding the student teaching semester. Stemming from the theoretical framework for the program and building upon the experiences from the summer, this field-based course focuses on experiences that will assist candidates in understanding the specific school and urban community in which they are working. The majority of the experiences and assignments within the course occur in the community rather than on campus; the candidates in the course physically meet approximately eight times during the semester to debrief experiences and participate in cohort experiences. Course activities and assignments include text discussions, community panelists, family interviews and visits, participation in community events and the implementation of a family involvement activity.

Within the “Working with Families and Communities” course, readings and discussions focus on diversity of families and the importance of family on the success of urban youth. Candidates are given opportunity to examine their own assumptions about the definition of family and family involvement as they reflect on the research and experiences of others. Course readings have included the works of Amatea (2009) as well as Turner-Vorbeck and Marsh (2007).

Three class periods have been dedicated to panel discussions designed to help broaden candidate knowledge of the diversity of families and the schools’ roles in connecting with and responding to the needs of their students. Panels have included a principal panel, a panel on how to conduct family visits, and a panel of families, including those who are often marginalized by schools. Family panelists have included same-sex parents, parents of students with special needs, non-English speaking families, and foster parents.

This course is heavily focused on helping candidates break down perceived borders between school and family by asking them to examine school-family relationships and reach out to families in authentic ways. Candidates conduct interviews with school personnel and then administer candidate-created family surveys. The interviews and surveys are intended to gather data the candidates then analyze to assess the current involvement, communication, and partnership between families and the school. Candidates are also asked to conduct two to three family visits either at the family’s home or at a location chosen by the family. This experience helps candidates gain experience in building relationships with families. Attendance and participation at community events also provides candidates an opportunity to interact with families and students outside of school and practice skills in establishing relationships with families. Course experiences ask candidates to break down

the traditional power structure and hierarchal borders that often exist between school and family.

The culminating experience for this course is the creation and implementation of a family involvement activity. Throughout all of the course experiences, candidates are asked to collect data regarding the interests, desires, and needs of families and use this data to create a family involvement activity. Candidates implement the plan as a final activity in crossing (and removing) borders between the teacher candidate and his/her students and families.

Methodology

This article examines the impact of the courses on candidates' perceptions of urban communities and urban teaching. Data collection activities took place during the 2009-2010 school year. An external evaluator and the program coordinator conducted all inquiry activities.

Participants

The sample consisted of 33 teacher education candidates in a mid-sized university located in a metropolitan area. Candidates involved in the study were entering their senior year in college and the second year of a two-year professional education program. Twelve percent of the respondents were candidates of color and 15.6% of the respondents were male; 81% of the respondents were White females. This representative sample provided opportunity to gain the most information-rich and relevant cases, as the candidates demographically represent the larger teaching population of the geographic area.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the summer and fall semesters of 2009, data were collected from each candidate a minimum of eight times. Data were acquired through course reflections submitted throughout the experience; candidates were asked to keep a journal to reflect on course activities and the impact experiences had on their perceptions of teaching in urban schools. Candidates were encouraged to record thoughts regarding the campus- and field-based activities as well as changes in perception and/or understanding of their roles as teachers. Prompts were provided to the candidates as a guide (e.g., "How has your experience this week/ this class changed your perception or understanding?")

Qualitative data were organized, managed, and analyzed through inductive analysis with an open coding approach (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Data were reviewed through the lens of the two research questions, "How

has this experience influenced candidates' perception of urban communities?" and "How has this experience influenced candidates' perceptions of being a teacher in an urban school?" The open coding approach, in which the researcher is open to the data and possible themes that emerge, was used for the initial data analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Data charts were then analyzed through content analysis, and themes or categories among the data were identified (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Data included the candidates' reflections of their perceptions of the community throughout the course and their perceived changes in perception of urban communities and of teaching in urban communities.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Study results reveal that candidates shared many common perceptions of urban communities and perceptions of teaching in urban schools. Qualitative themes that emerged were:

- Understanding of and appreciation for community agencies;
- Changed perception of families including a new understanding of self and others;
- New understanding of community;
- Desire to be involved in the urban community; and
- New understanding of the role of teachers in urban schools.

Understanding and Appreciation for Community Agencies

As a result of the field trips, service learning activities, and internship experiences, candidates expressed a new understanding of community agencies as well as the interconnectedness of the not-for-profit sector. Upon reflecting on her first day at her internship, one candidate wrote, "It made me realize how much work goes into feeding people for free." Continually, candidates expressed that they "never knew this place existed" regarding the numerous agencies they visited and studied. Two candidates' reflections are representative of the cohort:

I never had heard of [agency] or knew anything about it upon arriving. I think it is an amazing organization and it is nice to see all of the support it receives from the community!

This is a great resource to know about... I had no idea this place even existed.

***Changed Perception of Families
Including a New Understanding of Self and Others***

Many of the candidates had “ah-ha” moments as they discovered their own biases and challenged their own assumptions. Through this experience, candidates reflected on their own preconceived notions as well as their thought processes as they began to appreciate and relate to families in urban communities. One candidate shared,

This has been nothing short of an amazing experience... my preconceived notions have been questioned and, now more than ever, I am able to see the depths of inequality.

Another candidate discovered the opportunity to learn from others,

Today... a little girl started yelling at me. She said, “See? This is why I hate White people. You judge us and you think you are better than us”... This is the first time I have ever felt hated because of my race. I learned a valuable lesson here. She was right about so much of what she said. I have read tons of books about teaching diverse/minority students but now I understand.

Another candidate discovered that she could relate to families she once would have thought different from her,

I saw a little boy and his mom who were homeless... the lovingness of the mother, you could tell she was doing everything she could to protect him and support him.

One candidate’s journal highlighted new understanding of self through experiences with others:

Today I was playing... and interacting with the students and I thought (not for the first time) that “there is nothing wrong with these kids.” In one sense this thought is quite embarrassing since it shows how thoroughly my thoughts about these kids, my view of them as “other” is entrenched in my mind. At last, I could even be somewhat joyful about this embarrassment, my ignorance is laid bare for me to see, and be finished with—hopefully completely.

New Understanding of Community

As the candidates learned about the history of the city, they began changing their thoughts from judgment to understanding. Many candidates began reflecting on the inequities as a result of institutional racism and segregation rather than (as previously thought) a result of individual choice. One candidate summed up her new understanding in stating,

[segregation] is an abusive and inhumane cycle. We remove jobs and

educational opportunity from these areas and then label them as dangerous and [we] wonder why poverty exists.

Another candidate discovered her own lack of consciousness regarding the inequities of urban communities,

It never crossed my mind to pay such close attention to what surrounds a students' home or where they get groceries.

Similarly, another candidate reflected on her previous lack of knowledge:

This was an eye opening experience for me seeing how [racialization] has come to be... This is a topic I have not thought about before. I think it is good to have these brought to my attention so I can become more aware of myself and my environment.

Candidates also began making connections between understanding the community and the role of the teacher. One candidate wrote:

The readings up to this point have really opened my eyes to the institutional racism that shaped [the city's] housing landscape... As a teacher, these historical events are useful in understanding why a school's make-up is the way it is.

Desire to Be Involved in and Serve the Urban Community

A theme that illuminates the change in perception and the magnitude of breaking down barriers is that of the candidates' new desire to be a part of the community. Candidates began seeing urban communities not as those that need to be saved, but rather as places in which they want to belong and want to serve. One candidate reflected, "I have a renewed desire to give back to the community with my time." Another stated,

This highlights the importance of people in the community volunteering time... It seems if I am not doing my part in the community, then I am responsible for the plight of others.

Another candidate discovered her own desire to be a part of the community and summed up the theme represented by the cohort, in writing,

I read a quote on the wall that made sense of all of this for me. It said, "I always wondered why someone didn't do something like this, then I realized, I was someone."

New Understanding of the Role of Teacher in Urban Schools

A final theme centered on the role of teacher in urban communities. Candidates discovered the necessity for urban teachers to get to know their students and their communities if they are to be truly effective and transformative teachers. One candidate commented,

While I may never truly understand all they go through, I need to understand my students and be aware of their situations. How can I teach, if I don't understand?

Likewise, another candidate wrote,

I've realized there is so much I don't know about the community, I need to keep learning as much as I can so I can truly help my students.

Another candidate expressed her discovery that diversity is a strength,

Her reality is so much different than mine... When someone says 'color doesn't matter' they are wrong. As teachers we should choose to see color and use it to benefit our students. We should be culturally responsive.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings of this study show that by creating opportunities for teacher candidates to cross borders and step outside their comfort zones, learning can be optimized. Findings of this study are promising and demonstrate that carefully-designed, non-school experiences in teacher education can have significant impact on the preparation of urban teachers. The findings support the recommendations for the development of quality teaching and professional education practices that promote diversity, equity, and global perspectives. Study results demonstrate that experiences within urban communities and engagement with families and students from urban schools are a rich and relevant means for preparing urban teachers. Through course readings; experiences; and engagement with diverse populations within communities, candidates were exposed to and participated in the analysis of issues related to culture, language, ethnicity, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Candidates gained insight of themselves and others as they engaged with urban communities and families and reflected on their roles as teachers in urban schools.

The courses in this study can be replicated in other urban teacher preparation programs. The courses and experiences are easily transferable to all urban-serving teacher education programs. Additionally, the experiences respond to the current literature by demonstrating change in candidates' perceptions of urban communities through extensive field experiences and border-crossing opportunities. The results highlight the relevance and value of providing candidates with differentiated field experiences within and throughout teacher preparation.

In addition to the results reported above, there have been additional relevant discoveries that inform replication of the courses. Use

of the cohort model has been a critical component in developing safe environments for learning. Candidates experience a great deal of self-examination that can include feelings of guilt, shame, fear, and even anger or sadness. In order for candidates to grow from these feelings and develop an awareness of self and others, classroom environments need to be safe spaces where candidates feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings without the fear of being politically incorrect or judged by others. For candidates to truly grow in their understanding of self and others and develop as a teacher in an urban school, they need to be given permission to be “who they are” and grow from there. The cohort model assists candidates in being willing to take risks and share openly with each other. In such a model, candidates develop professional learning communities throughout the first year of a professional program. These learning communities become strengthened through dialogue in professional courses and shared field experiences. The intent is that once candidates begin the “Community Immersion” course they are experienced in and ready to continue the difficult and necessary discussions about cultural borders and, as a result, can authentically begin crossing and eliminating these borders in their own teaching.

Another critical component has been in the selection of faculty. Both courses require faculty members who are truly vested in the community and can lead by example through their interactions with and knowledge of the urban community. It is the faculty members’ passion and commitment to engaging with the community that enable candidates to understand the value and significance of involvement with urban communities and citizens. It is also critical that faculty in all courses are able to facilitate difficult conversations.

The implications for implementing cultural immersion experiences in teacher education are far-reaching for students in PK-12 settings. The cultural disconnect or mismatch (Au, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Sleeter, 2001) characterized in much of the literature devoted to examining the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds underscores the need for effectively preparing educators to meet the changing demographics of the student population. Further research is needed to extend the work across programs and examine the impact of cultural immersion experiences on teacher and student learning. The expansion of cultural immersion experiences, such as the one described, will contribute to strengthening the efforts of teacher preparation programs to produce candidates who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to ensuring positive outcomes for all children.

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