

From 'Learning to Teach' to  
'Becoming a Member of an Urban Education Community'

by

Jana Noel  
California State University, Sacramento

Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association  
April, 2004  
San Diego

Contact Information:

Dr. Jana Noel  
California State University, Sacramento  
Department of Teacher Education  
6000 J Street  
Sacramento, CA 95819-6079

[noelj@csus.edu](mailto:noelj@csus.edu)  
(916)278-5514

From 'Learning to Teach' to  
'Becoming a Member of an Urban Education Community'

Jana Noel  
California State University, Sacramento  
[noelj@csus.edu](mailto:noelj@csus.edu)

As students in a traditional elementary teacher education program, the pre-service teachers in the Sacramento City Center at California State University, Sacramento have been 'learning to teach.' The focus has been on high quality, effective, caring teaching practices modeled in student teaching placements within the Sacramento City Unified School District. Courses are taught at the university, and the 75 student teachers in the center are placed in approximately 15 different schools.

This paper describes the use of research to shift this traditional center toward having an urban, community-oriented focus. While keeping the focus on quality and caring, the center now has the focus of 'becoming a member of an urban education community.' The narrative data gathered through research, which will be described in this paper, has been used to provide the qualitative data needed to support this shift toward an urban, community-oriented teacher education center.

Theoretical Framework

The definition of 'urban' used in this study and in the newly transformed Urban Teacher Education Center has several components, drawn in part from the work of Lois Weiner and of Martin Haberman. There are several distinguishing characteristics of the definition of urban used here, relating to k-12 students, to the structure of the district, and to the schools' connections to community. First, the urban school serves highly diverse students of poverty. Second, the urban school is part of a highly centralized, bureaucratic system, which emphasizes a highly standardized curriculum and testing. And third, the

definition of urban used here includes schools that have the involvement of community agencies in the schools.

Several urban educators have proposed as part of their overall work on urban education that involvement with community should be an important part of teacher education. Howey (2001), for instance, in describing “The Great City Universities Urban Educator Corps Partnership Initiative,” lays out 10 general attributes of a good urban teacher education program, including attribute #8: “The involvement of prospective teachers in a host of urban community and community agency activities” (p. 13). The CREDE (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence) group, which includes educators such as Roland Tharp and Catherine Cooper, identifies a key theme within the research that they have conducted as “Schools, Family, and Community,” which entails “methods and principles for local contextualization of instruction through school interrelationships with families and community agencies.” Murrell (2001), as another example, proposes a particular framework for effective urban teaching that he calls “The Community Teacher.” He presents a model of a community teacher that connects and engages teachers with the communities where their urban students live. And finally Luis Moll has advocated for teachers to become engaged with the families of their students, conducting home visits with an ethnographic eye. Teachers who learn the community’s and family’s “funds of knowledge” will be better able to connect to the daily lives and values of the children in their classrooms.

These are just several of the many proposals within the urban education literature that propose frameworks and practices for effective urban teacher education. This study and the shift from a traditional teacher preparation center to an urban, community-

oriented center, are based in particular on the ideas of the Great City Universities' Urban Educator Corp's principle of involving prospective teachers in the community agencies within urban communities (Howey); the CREDE group's strand of "Schools, Family, and Community;" Murrell's "community teacher" concept; and Moll's community funds of knowledge approach.

### Goals for the Study

The goal for the research was to gather narrative data from principals, teachers, and student teachers about how to create a sense of community in an urban educational system. The concept of community used in this research has four layers: classroom community, school-wide community, the school's neighborhood community, and the larger urban education community. The narratives gathered from the research indicate the extent to which these urban educators feel a sense of community within each of these layers of their educational setting. Using the evidence gathered from this study, the center has begun putting into practice the ideas given by the participants.

### Methodology

The researcher conducted interviews and focus groups with three principals and six teachers within the Sacramento City school district, where the student teachers are placed for their student teaching, followed by written surveys and focus groups of 21 of these student teachers. The questions ask each participant to describe the practices that they feel have created a sense of community for them within the *classroom community*, the *school-wide community*, the *school's neighborhood community*, and the larger *urban education community*.

## Findings

Results indicate that none of the participants described being a part of any larger urban educational community outside of their own school or school's neighborhood. However, their answers portray active educational communities at the school level. This finding is tempered by the fact that while many of the responses portrayed community-building in general within schools, a smaller number of participants indicated an urban focus within these activities. A summary here of the results of the research show a different level and type of community focus for each group -- principals, teachers, and student teachers -- with their examples of community activities included.

## Principals

All three principals focused on their own school-wide activities in which student teachers have participated. The level of community involvement indicated was determined to be at the *school-wide community* and the *school's neighborhood community*. Examples given by principals include:

- in-services for their school's teachers that student teachers have been invited to join;
- Science and Math Family Nights;
- after school programs working with students;
- arranging for student teachers to provide an in-service training on computers for her classroom teachers;
- arranging to have her teachers and student teachers "take a bus" sponsored by the school's Healthy Start program to visit the neighborhood agencies and resource offices to learn more about the lives of their students.

*Common language* used by all three principals was the *sense of community* that they each feel exists within their schools, with examples such as

- community-building retreat for teachers;
- a smiling front office staff;
- open invitations to student teachers to become involved in school-wide activities.

### Teachers

Each of the six teachers interviewed, who all took part in focus groups as well, focused on *classroom community* and *school-wide community*. Examples given by teachers include

- involving student teachers in the creation of the school newspaper;
- involvement in MESA (Math, Engineering, and Science for All) program;
- parent-teacher conferences;
- being a mentor to the student council at the school.

While these teachers seemed eager to describe their own participation with their student teachers, they did not within their discussion use the language of a larger school-wide or neighborhood sense of community.

### Student Teachers

Student teacher responses on the survey and in the focus groups were focused mainly on activities they took part in that made them feel like part of the *classroom community*. These activities were mostly instructional activities that they created either as part of a university course or that they collaboratively created with their cooperating teacher. Examples included

- a ‘parent lunch,’ planned collaboratively between the student teacher and the teacher, as a way to include her students’ parents as part of the classroom community;
- creation of a ‘teddy bear’ tree to help English Language students, having her 4<sup>th</sup> grade students bring their own cultures into the classroom to create a sense of family and community;
- ‘getting to know’ the school’s neighborhood community. This activity was an assignment they did individually as part of a university course requirement.

Although student teachers spoke highly of each of these activities as a way to learn about the students’ community, *they did not necessarily feel like they became a part of that community through these activities*. Although these are the same student teachers who were involved in school-wide community activities mentioned by the principals and teachers, the student teachers’ responses did not seem to indicate a sense of recognition that they have become a part of the school’s community.

#### Summary of Findings

All participants – principals, teachers, and student teachers – were able to identify how they were part of an educational community, either in the classroom, the school, or the school’s community. Examples related to student teachers included being part of staff meetings, working on school-wide projects such as student council, and visiting the school’s neighborhood community. However, none of the respondents indicated feeling like they were a part of any larger urban educational community from which they could gain new ideas. And importantly, although the principals and teachers indicated ways in

which they had helped student teachers to become part of the school-wide or school' neighborhood communities, the student teachers themselves did not mention those in their surveys.

Another interesting point was the absence of feeling like part of a larger urban educational community on the part of the principals. One of the principals, in particular, was part of an invited conference of 12 principals identified from throughout the state of California as being exemplary urban administrators, and who took part in a conference specifically to discuss effective urban education. A second principal in the study is the President of the Association of California School Administrators. At the March 2004 annual meeting of this group, which was attended by all three principals who were in this study, there was a panel that discussed the use of teacher research in urban schools to improve urban education. Thus, the principals are indeed members of a larger educational community that embraces the study of how to improve urban education; but they did not express that involvement within this study.

#### New Practices Based on the Research Findings

Together, the results from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys of the members of Sacramento's urban school districts and teacher preparation program are guiding the transition into an urban education community, which is now titled the Urban Teacher Education Center (UTEC). The key changes of this transformed UTEC are moving the university courses into an elementary school within the Sacramento City Unified School District, and connecting the teacher preparation program with the community agencies and resources that serve the schools. Specific changes resulting from this study include the following. 1) Based on responses from principals and student

teachers, schools are now being selected for placements for student teachers based on their level of connection with community agencies and resources. 2) Based on responses from principals and student teachers, student teachers will be required to study the school's connections with community as part of the university courses. 3) Based on responses from principals and teachers, student teachers will be required to take part in a school-wide community activity as part of their field experience.

#### Sample References

- Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (2004). Various reports. Retrieved from the CREDE website at <http://www.coe.uh.edu/crede/synthesis.html>
- Haberman, M. (2000). *What makes a teacher education program relevant preparation for teaching diverse students in urban poverty schools? (The Milwaukee Teacher Education Center Model)*. ERIC Document No. ED442745.
- Howey, Kenneth R. (2001). *A conceptual map to guide The Great City Universities Urban Educator Corps Partnership Initiative*. Retrieved from The Great City Universities website at [http://www.gcu-edu.org/conceptual framework.doc](http://www.gcu-edu.org/conceptual_framework.doc)
- Moll, L. and Others. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(10), 132-41
- Murrell (2001). *The Community Teacher: A New Framework for Effective Urban Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Weiner, L. (2000). Research in the 90s: Implications for urban teacher preparation. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 369-406.