

From “Urban” to Urban:  
Engaging Schools and Communities  
in Teacher Education

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Introduction

The need for sophisticated and highly skilled educators in urban schools is painfully obvious, even to the most casual observer. National and local test data demonstrate that students in urban schools are generally not achieving at the same levels as are their suburban and more affluent peers. Teacher educators in urban areas struggle with how to best prepare and encourage their students in teacher preparation programs to enter city schools to assist in changing this bleak picture.

The Teaching and Learning faculty of Loyola University of Chicago’s School of Education face this challenge. Part of our school’s mission is to serve the educational needs of Chicago and the surrounding areas (Loyola University of Chicago [LUC], 2013a). We revised our master’s degree program in secondary education in 2008 to better prepare teacher candidates for work in schools that serve predominantly low-income students in the region’s urban communities. Although many faculty members already had relationships with the public and Catholic schools in Chicago, we felt that there was a need to be more explicit about our

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commitment to urban education. This resulted in a redesign of the program to better prepare teacher candidates to be effective educators in urban schools and to improve the quality of education offered to youth in the Chicago metropolitan area.

The revised master's program concentrates on preparing teacher candidates who can demonstrate the critical elements of effective urban teaching and of promoting social justice. These include a strong sense of self-efficacy, an understanding of how broader social and historical issues affect teaching and learning, an in-depth understanding of subject matter and pedagogy, and a commitment to learning from students and their communities (Ryan, 2006). There also is a significant need for teacher candidates to demonstrate resilience and to possess the ability to respond constructively to challenging situations (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999; Steinhardt, n.d.).

In this article, we focus on the impact of a new core course that anchors teachers to, and broadens how we prepare teachers to engage in, urban communities: *Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities*. Our examination of this new course focused on the following question: To what extent and in what ways does *Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities* have an impact on teacher candidates in terms of their understanding of: (a) social justice, (b) the relationship between their identity and their pedagogical practices, and (c) urban communities as educational resources?

Students in this course consider the social, economic, political, cultural, and historical factors that shape urban teaching and learning. In addition, by examining the relationship between their own social and cultural identities and their pedagogical practices, they also reflect on the importance of educators' understanding themselves as members of the communities in which they work. An essential element of the course is students' exploring school-community relationships through a field experience with a community organization. In this regard, Anderson and Stillman (2010) stated:

Student teachers need more than mere experience in placements that approximate the conditions and challenges they will face as beginning teachers. They need to see and, whenever possible, be apprenticed by adaptive experts who are successfully engaging in equity-minded practice in the face of typical policy- and resource-related challenges in urban, high-needs schools. (p. 130)

Students work with organizations on an educational initiative and research the relationship between the organization, community, and local schools, which includes their developing community and organiza-

tional asset maps (Kretzmann, McKnight, Dobrowolski, & Punttenney, 2005). Most teachers' beliefs about urban teaching are associated with the degree to which their previous schooling and life experiences were monocultural or multicultural (Kyles & Olafson, 2008; Parker & Howard, 2009; Richardson, 1996). Research demonstrates that, regardless of students' prior experiences, diverse practicum experiences that incorporate multiple opportunities for guided reflection can encourage the students to inquire into their own attitudes about diversity and teaching in urban schools in ways that will influence their future instructional practice. Kyles and Olafson noted:

Our research affirms that every opportunity for contact with cultural diversity, both personally and professionally, provides teacher candidates with added experiences for reflection that connect with and build on previous experiences, reaffirm cultural diversity, or challenge existing notions and prejudices. Becoming an effective educator is a parallel journey between the personal and professional that must be taken seriously. Hopefully these experiences will inspire teacher candidates to embrace and practice culturally responsive and equitable pedagogy for all learners. (p. 515)

In this article, we offer a view of the program that we developed with these principles in mind by focusing on the impact of one of the new core courses.

## Background

### *Reimagining and Revising Our Approach*

One of the major aims of our revised program was to work with teacher candidates to examine the realities of urban schools without discouraging them from teaching in those schools. To achieve this goal, we planned to take a collaborative approach that involved the university, schools, and communities through school- and community-based field experiences. This resulted in opportunities to deepen our relationships with local schools and to develop meaningful partnerships with community organizations.

To inform this work, faculty engaged in a review of research on urban teacher education and teaching supported by the university's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL).<sup>1</sup> In the review of literature on effectively preparing teachers to teach in culturally diverse schools, the following program elements were found to be essential: institutional commitment to diversity and collaboration (Gomez, 1996; Price & Valli, 1998; Zeichner, Grant, & Gay, 1998), purposeful selection of teacher candidates (Gomez, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994), rigorous course content

with a commitment to diversity (Phuntsog, 1995; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992), and diverse and extensive field experiences with support (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Zeichner et al., 1998). The overall program was redesigned to address each of these elements. We used the university’s commitment to diversity and its promotion of collaboration through interdisciplinary research centers to support the new program. We added the requirement of an admission essay that called for potential teacher candidates to explain why a commitment to social justice is vital to preparing to teach in urban communities. The final two elements were threaded throughout the program’s course and fieldwork and were included in a new course, *Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities*.

Faculty also examined programs known for their work in teacher education for urban contexts. Center X, the teacher education program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), reflects a number of the essential program elements for preparing teachers to work in high-need schools (UCLA Center X, 2013). The Lynch School of Education at Boston College maintains a scholarship-based urban cohort within its general M.Ed. program. This one-year program provides students “with an academically challenging education specifically responsive to the concerns and needs of urban students, families, schools, and communities” (Boston College, 2013, para. 3).

The Urban Diversity Teacher Education Program at York University, Ontario, Canada, employs a pedagogical model designed to promote candidates’ desires to investigate their own racial formation and to critique and challenge power relations at work within the school (Solomon, Manoukian, & Clarke, 2007). The program also requires candidates to become involved in community-based service-learning programs as well as provides opportunities for the teaching and learning experiences in the university, during student teaching, and in the community to inform and transform each other. In the communities where candidates student teach, they use their research skills to explore the social, cultural, recreational, and economic resources from the perspectives of stakeholders. Candidates are transformed from their initial conceptions of working-class communities as places to “escape” to spaces that are “progressive locations of democratic participation and communal dialogue” (Solomon et al., 2007, p.72).

The programs at UCLA, Boston College, and York University provided important information on the kind of coursework and field experiences used to better prepare teacher candidates to teach in high-need urban schools. We redesigned our M.Ed. program to incorporate the essential elements and practices of notable urban teacher preparation programs to offer a program with a strong and articulated urban focus.

***Developing a Course to Focus the Program***

To focus the program's efforts on urban schools and communities, we established a course, Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities, which all students are required to take. Throughout this course, students reflect on the importance of educators' understanding themselves as members of the communities in which they work by examining the relationship between their own social and cultural identities and their pedagogical practices.

An essential element of the course is students' exploring school-community relationships through a field experience with a community organization. The course involves staff from (CURL), who work with students on how to conduct community-based research. Students learn the skills of community asset mapping (Kretzmann et al., 2005) and assess the assets of the community and organization in which they serve. They also reflect on their own experience and what they learned about themselves through the process.

Schools are often seen as isolated entities with little or no connections to their communities. The field experience tied to Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities allows students to see these connections by engaging them in educational initiatives of local community organizations. This assists students in developing a more sophisticated understanding of urban communities and how community organizations can serve as resources for schools. CURL worked with education faculty to create connections with its partner organizations to arrange placements for students.

***Explicitly Infusing our Conceptual Framework Rounded on Social Justice***

Preparing preservice teachers for social justice entails a focus on what it means to pursue justice in the classroom and involves (a) critiquing educational systems, (b) acknowledging the structural inequalities embedded in schooling as a major player in perpetuating unequal access, and (c) viewing teachers as change agents in and beyond education (Cochran-Smith, 1999; James-Wilson, 2007). Developing and requiring a course that infuses social justice throughout course readings, assignments, and field experiences exposed students to democratic ideals. Social justice sits at the core of our schools' stated mission (LUC, 2013a) and in the conceptual framework that guides curricula (LUC, 2013a). Given the university's focus on social justice, a course that threads the concepts embedded in social justice within the course goals, activities, and assessments is necessary for our teacher candidates to be effective in urban schools. As part of our effort to prepare knowledgeable profes-

sionals to work in diverse settings with diverse clients to bring about just and ethical change, the course creates opportunities for the candidates to experience practical applications of the mission.

The practical experiences of the course afford opportunities to extend our discussions of marginalized groups to social action through partnerships with community organizations. The importance of broadening teacher candidates' understanding of teaching and learning beyond school walls is supported in literature on preservice and inservice teacher education (Epstein et al., 2009; Murrell, 2001) and related to the literature that calls for multiple and diverse placements for teacher candidates (Anderson & Stillman, 2010; Bondy & Ross, 1998; Zeichner et al., 1998). Some teacher candidates opted to conduct their field experiences at social service agencies, after-school programs, tutoring, leadership, or apprenticeship-based programs. But whether candidates were involved in developing a character education program for a local high school for a neighborhood organization, implementing educational support services at a long-term transitional living program for homeless women with children, or working on community outreach and youth development activities for a Hip Hop church, they had opportunities to encounter hope and the reality of structural barriers embedded in systemic discrimination.

Each of the community organizations that were asked to partner with our teacher education program to host an intern is engaged in work that touches the lives of marginalized populations. We felt that student interactions with the organizations' programming would develop their awareness of how applying the same rules to unequal groups often can generate unequal results. This awareness is crucial to teacher candidates and to practicing teachers who interact with children whose lives and achievement are inextricably linked to the harsh realities of our unjust society. Students are able to choose from participating sites based on their interests, expertise, or particular client demographics. The most successful partnerships were those for which the organizations allowed the teacher candidates to employ their leadership and pedagogical skills while engaging with the children's lives, families, and communities.

Serving as a mechanism for community-based partnerships and teacher education programs, the course requirements were aimed at supporting students' practical notions of democratic ideals and the work required to teach from a social justice framework. The readings and assignments directed them to make connections with democracy, schools, and schooling in urban areas from an asset-based perspective. Course readings moved the students from the harsh realities of discrimination and marginalization portrayed by startling statistics and discussions of the myth of meritocracy to firsthand accounts of effective curriculum ap-

proaches in urban classrooms. Discussions focused on the social, economic, political, cultural, and historical factors that shape urban teaching and learning from a critical lens. These practices took shape by “involving teacher candidates in the construction of knowledge, building on their strengths while challenging their misconceptions, helping them examine ideas from multiple perspective, using varied assessment strategies, and making the culture of our classroom inclusive of all” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 197). The assignments, in this course apart from other sociology or history of education course offerings, required the students not only to take an introspective look at how their cultural identity affects their approach to curriculum and pedagogy and review related empirical research but also to immerse themselves in a community institution and analyze their surroundings from an asset-based perspective. Assessing their readings and field experiences through a social justice framework provided teacher candidates with applied examples of the realistic impact of democratic ideals in urban school settings.

### ***Collaboration with Urban Educators***

One way to assist students in learning how to become agents of change was to invite guests who themselves work as agents in and with schools to visit with our students. This experience also broadened the students' exposure to available resources in the city and the district. We included a teacher panel comprised of our alumni, who shared effective strategies and success stories from their schools and classrooms. Teacher panelists also shared their realities and passion for teaching underserved students of color and, in some cases, became role models for the teacher candidates. Additional partnerships were developed with practicing teachers and district coordinators to increase the students' connections with current and local examples of agents of change from the field.

Developing a content-specific service-learning unit provided a means for students to explore options for incorporating neighborhood and organizational resources into their classroom teaching. In an effort to expose students to local resources that can support their efforts to connect their classrooms with authentic, empowering, and real-world curriculum, we incorporated a session with the district's service-learning coordinator. His dynamic presentations involved videos of local projects that spanned content areas, activities that guided the students to generate ideas for projects, and opportunities to assess proposal examples to determine whether they met the criteria to qualify as an effective service learning activity.

### Theoretical Framework

The Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course was developed based on best practices from the urban teacher preparation literature in an effort to better prepare teacher candidates to be effective in urban schools with diverse populations. Preparing preservice candidates to effectively teach in ways that recognize and value diversity is essential. Some teacher education programs still operate on the false assumption that candidates will develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help them teach students of color without any direct instruction. The flaw in this logic is the stated expectation that students would receive field experiences in schools with economically diverse populations and, therefore, would be prepared for diversity (Fuller, 1992). To effectively prepare teachers for clinical observations of and student teaching experiences in urban schools, this course provides explicit instruction in socio-cultural issues of diversity and social justice. Being exposed to the social, cultural, and historical forces in urban education from a critical lens early in their program has the potential to raise candidates' awareness in ways that they can apply in subsequent courses and school-based experiences. This critical perspective, coupled with a field experience in a community organization focused on advancing the educational status of marginalized populations, offers opportunities for candidates to reconsider their beliefs about diverse populations (Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

While urban schools often depend on universities to prepare teacher candidates for the complex work that they will be expected to perform in urban contexts, the use of field experiences in community organizations in targeted urban communities is not common. Since our implementation of this course, there has been a small, but growing, body of literature that supports the integration of these kinds of field experiences (Catapano & Huisman, 2010; Gandy, Pierce, & Smith, 2009; McDonald et al., 2011; Noel, 2010; Onore & Gildin, 2010). This literature identifies the values of having teacher candidates engage with children and families in community settings to interrupt the candidates' myths and assumptions about diverse children and families and to enhance their thinking about inter- and intra-group diversity.

Teacher education for social justice is one perspective explored in the literature that examines ways to prepare preservice teachers (James-Wilson, 2007). This approach focuses on what it means to pursue justice in the classroom. The approach views teachers as change agents in and beyond education and involves critiquing educational systems and acknowledging the structural inequalities embedded in schooling

(Cochran-Smith, 1999). Educational researchers have suggested that teacher candidates learn about social justice issues through an approach that is integrated into their program (James-Wilson, 2007; Larkin, 1995). Through the Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course, we hoped that students would not only develop an understanding of who is privileged by the traditional functions of schooling but also begin to build strategies for the roles that they can play as teachers in cooperation with communities to assist in empowering marginalized groups (Epstein et al., 2009).

### Methods

Our examination of this course focused on the following question: To what extent and in what ways does Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities have an impact on teacher candidates in terms of their understanding of (a) social justice, (b) the relationship between their identity and their pedagogical practices, and (c) urban communities as educational resources? A qualitative analysis of students' responses to key assessments from the course was used to analyze this question. Out of 49 students enrolled in three different sections of this course from Fall 2008 through Fall 2009, 76% were female; 74% were European American, 8% were Asian American, 8% were Latina, 5% were African American, and 5% were multiracial; and 84% were preservice teacher candidates. Of the 21 (43%) study participants, 20 were female. Most of the respondents (18) were European American. The sample included two individuals who identified as multi-racial and one African American participant. Two-thirds (14) of students who took the course were preservice and one-third (7) were inservice. To focus the analysis, we used only the responses from the preservice candidates for this study. The participants' written assignments were thematically coded and analyzed. The code list included definitions of social justice, perceptions of teaching as an act of social justice, self-perception as change agent, previous experience with social justice, racial/ethnic/gender/religious identity development, personal identities' influence on pedagogical practices, previous experiences with urban communities, reactions to realities in urban communities, involvement in community organization fieldwork, perceptions of urban communities as an asset to teaching, and perceptions of teaching in urban communities. For inter-rater reliability, two individuals coded each of the students' written assignments. Both of the individuals who coded and analyzed the work also had taught at least one section of the course.

**Data Sources**

Four core assessments were included in the analysis: reflective journal entries, personal reflection on culture and pedagogy essays, fieldwork reflections, and a paper that provided a description of the results of the student’s community-based research project. Two formative assessments and two summative papers were chosen for analysis. The reflective journals were completed over time and allowed for an exploration of the participants’ developing understanding. Each assessment was submitted and assessed with a 5-point rubric online. The assessments analyzed from the course included:

*Reflective journals.* Students wrote eight weekly reflections. Journal entries needed to focus on course readings, relevant class discussions, and field experiences. Students chose to respond to prompts given in class or to write about their own experiences. Reflections could concern students’ experiences, observations, and intellectual and professional growth in relation to teaching and learning in urban communities.

*Personal reflection on culture and pedagogy.* In an essay, students reflected on the relationship between their social identities and pedagogical practice. This essay concerned how their social identities affect their approach to content, pedagogy, teacher-student relationships, and classroom environment. The students addressed each element of the following question: How does who you are affect the way you teach, what you choose to teach, and how you understand your students and your expectations of them?

*Fieldwork reflection.* All students completed 20 hours of fieldwork with a community organization in the Chicago area. Students prepared a reflection on their field experiences and on conducting a community-based research project. Students addressed the knowledge and skills utilized during their field experience, social justice issues raised, urban communities as educational resources, and how they might use these resources in their teaching to enhance student learning.

*Community-based research project.* The final project for the course built upon the students’ field experiences. Students conducted a community-based research project of the community in which they were placed. This project addressed the organization and its mission, the educational programs offered by the organization, and the relationship between the organization and the communities and clients served and resulted in a detailed community asset map, a detailed organization asset map, and an analysis of how the organization can utilize community and organizational assets to better meet the educational needs of the communities and clients served.

These assessments provided insight into the students' reactions, knowledge, and perceptions in regard to teaching and learning in urban schools and communities throughout the course of the class. Each of the core assessments was analyzed.

### Findings

Here we present a summary of the results by research question, with the aim of identifying and integrating the most common and consistent themes across the different assessments. In the following sections, we discuss three themes: social justice, the relationship between identity and pedagogical practices, and urban communities as educational resources. Although the themes are distinct, they overlap and intertwine. How and to what extent the Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course had an impact on teacher candidates are important aspects of how teacher educators effectively prepare and encourage their students to teach in underserved urban schools.

#### ***Social Justice in Action***

As is evident from the students' writing, their understanding of themselves and the role that they could potentially play as change agents for social justice in the classroom changed. This is reflected in the following response:

This project has opened my eyes to the issues that are present to urban students. . . . I always assumed that poor performing students lack interest and motivation. I had never thought that high school students would be expected to support themselves. (Elizabeth, European American)

The essay of another preservice teacher about her work with students in an afterschool program indicated her understanding of the realities of the urban context, resilience, and social justice from the students' perspective.

The main issues that the students worked on were issues of social justice. . . . Gangs have influenced the lives of most of the students in the [program name] either indirectly or directly. . . . Their lives are tough, but they keep showing up. Students feel that the [program name] gives them a chance to do something positive about the things that make them mad. (Martha, European American)

Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities provided space and an opportunity for students to explore the role of educators and education in relation to social justice. At one level, the discussions and assignments required students to identify a working definition of social justice and

resist the temptation to fall into the all-too-common understanding of urban teaching in and of itself as an act of social justice. A second aspect of this process was to operationalize social justice for themselves as educators. Through assigned readings, fieldwork experiences, and class discussions, students developed their understanding of what social justice is, what it is not, what it looks like in educational institutions, and how to enact it effectively for the benefit of the children who are being served. During the course, awareness of educational needs, instructional goals, and political and societal forces was enhanced, as one preservice teacher shared in her reflective journal:

We talked about what socially just education truly means and traditional concepts of good teaching are NOT enough, to say that teaching is socially just, it is not an accurate statement. We must push ourselves to become effective educators so that we may create authentic learning experiences in the classroom. Transforming our students' thinking, promoting intellectual development and preparing them to participate and benefit from their society. "We do not believe the world is a neutral place or that teaching is a neutral position" (Oakes & Lipton, 1998, p. 19)." . . . We must react to our surroundings, not sit back, choosing to be removed. (Denise, European American)

Empowerment, an essential element of social justice education, is often discussed but rarely effectively accomplished. Empowering students in K-12 education is a challenge for most institutions. Fortunately, through the community organization-based fieldwork, students in the course were exposed to models of student empowerment. These experiences supported an exploration of student-teacher partnerships, youth voice, and justice.

The social justice issues that were raised during my time with these incredibly bright high school students at [community organization] were plentiful. After working with them and asking them at the end of my time with them, what they felt they still needed from their school and community, they spoke of the need for more youth voice. Their experience with [program name] really has empowered them in their ability to see how effective their voices can be and especially when they are joined. . . . In their schools, they still face a power struggle with the adults and their teachers. They wish to have a healthy open communication established versus a give and pull of power trips. . . . The issue of restorative justice is perhaps the most important social justice issue they are dealing with. (Esther, European American)

### ***Confronting Pre-existing Beliefs***

For teachers to build empowering relationships with students, teachers need to be open to learning about students' lives, strengths,

and challenges. For some teacher candidates, this required a change in their beliefs about students as based on racial, social, and economic considerations. At a basic level, this work entailed the candidates' engaging in honest introspection about their own prejudices and racist beliefs. While course readings helped students investigate theories and historical trends, their community-based fieldwork provided opportunities to put their beliefs about race/ethnicity and social class into practice and to raise their awareness of the work that they will need to do to be effective in a classroom. This is illustrated in one student's account of her first day at the site:

Already, I feel that I have learned so much from the students. Among many other things, they are teaching me a great deal about my preconceptions and misconceptions about people or, specifically, students. I left today feeling ignorant and embarrassed by my initial personal reaction to some of these students—even after such extensive discussion in class. A specific student named Juan helped me to reflect on my assumptive tendencies based solely on appearance. Juan looks like an adult man. . . . I noticed him and his friend, Raul (also a teen who could pass for 28), sizing me up and whispering about me which, of course, made me feel a little uncomfortable and even a little insecure or unsafe. Juan and Raul were both in baggy jeans, oversized t-shirts, and gold jewelry with rather large tattoos scattered up their arms. I wondered if they were going to participate in the group activities and also wondered if they would be disciplinary problems in the program. Honestly (and I am utterly embarrassed to admit this), I even wondered if they had some gang involvement solely based on their appearances. As the class began, I realized that both Juan and Raul were volunteering, taking risks, and actively participating. Neither student seemed to have any disciplinary issues. At one point, Juan talked about how tired he is at the end of a school day because, in addition to school, he is his class president and keeps busy with that at school as well. At the end of class, he approached me and told me that he wanted to talk to me next week about Loyola because he's interested in going there next fall. I told him I'd love to talk about Loyola and asked what he wanted to go for and he responded, "To be a teacher." Shame on me. (Ann, European American)

In their attempts to integrate their academic understandings with their personal practices, the candidates' work in urban communities with students of color made them confront their beliefs about others in a way that reading from a text or class discussion could not. Ann was able to explore her own prejudice and recognize how her prejudgments interfered with her ability to work effectively. Her awareness of the limitations of her beliefs is critical in her development as a culturally competent educator.

The class also posed a challenge for those who had been taught not to see or to acknowledge differences in others. In class, we discussed how a color-blind approach also detaches a teacher from seeing who his or her students are, where they come from, and what strengths they bring to their learning as well as accurately identifying their academic, social, and emotional needs. Teacher candidates' beliefs of meritocracy also were confronted during the overview of statistics that illustrate the realities that students in urban schools face (or will face) in regard to achievement, dropping out, graduation, employment, earnings, and health. The statistics indicated that students in urban schools are not operating on a level playing field in any area. Students appear to be most affected by the funding gap but also by higher student mobility and lower teacher retention rates. They also began to accept that their preconceived notions of others could adversely affect their students' academic achievement and their ability to transform their students' lives. Two students shared their reactions to the experiences that they had in class and during their field placements that encouraged them to confront their preconceived notions.

Since our first class reading and discussion, I see the world in a different way. . . . It isn't comfortable to discuss these topics because I have always been taught not to recognize or focus on such facts. We are all the same and have the same opportunities, is a statement I have heard over and over again and used to believe. But, after our first class, I began to question this and other facts I thought I believed. While this isn't comfortable or easy, it is necessary for me as a future teacher to get rid of my incorrect ideologies before teaching in an urban environment. I don't want an incorrect or skewed view of mine to influence the potential of an urban student. (Sara, European American)

I would have never considered that students might live in homeless shelters or need to stay after school to escape troubles at home. . . . I also learned that relationships with teachers can offer students a place to go. While teachers cannot handle all these problems alone, they can connect students up with resources that can help them. (Julia, European American)

Candidates' understanding of their students' life circumstances is critical for relationship building and for establishing realistic classroom routines and behavior management plans. The above quotes demonstrate that, when a teacher candidate's prior experiences differ from those of his or her students, it can lead to misunderstandings and judgments about student motivation, ability, and engagement. Through their fieldwork in *Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities*, the teacher candidates had a glimpse of students' out-of-school lives, to which most teachers are

not privy when they are working with students in the classroom. They also experienced the power that student-teacher relationships can have during their fieldwork activities. Moreover, some learned that, when teachers have mutually respectful relationships with their students and knowledge of the community, they are better able to connect students and families with local resources that can offer social, academic, health, and/or economic support when needed.

### ***The Power and Responsibility of Privilege***

Throughout the course, we were, in effect, developing our candidates' understanding of the educational implications of "otherness." Much of the work in the course took students out of their comfort zones. Whether we were discussing inequality, unequal opportunities to learn, educational debt, culture and schooling, or the need to dismantle the myths of meritocracy and deficit thinking, we were asking students to question their long-held beliefs about how our society operates, who it works for, and who it hurts.

While interacting with others and learning about disheartening racial and economic statistics and unequal opportunity to learn school practices for students of color took students out of their comfort zones, discussing issues of privilege and Whiteness appeared to strike an unfamiliar but intense chord. It seemed that European American students were more comfortable engaging in work about "otherness" than they were analyzing their own position of privilege and power in our democracy.

Our discussion on White Privilege took me back to the uncomfortable feelings of guilt and naiveté of our first class session. Rarely do I think twice about the fact that I am white and have hidden and not-so-hidden advantages all around me. The section of *Teaching to Change the World* regarding White Privilege once again made me think about my behavior and the behavior of those around me, which is typically people that look like me and are of the same socio-economic status. I have tolerated inappropriate language and the perpetuation of stereotypes in my presence. I never thought of how harmful words and even silent judgment could be to marginalized populations. I can't change the color of band-aids, but I can do my part in my classroom to foster equality and a safe space for all students. (Martha, European American)

Processing and analyzing their social practices, associations, and advantages along racial lines is routine for most people of color, but, for most European American preservice education students, this was their first time examining their Whiteness or privilege. Even though the readings on White Privilege brought out some uncomfortable and intense emotions, the candidates viewed the process as necessary (McIntosh,

1988). Most importantly, their sense of responsibility for examining and changing their assumptions and behaviors was affected, as seen in their understanding of the harm that their privileged stance could cause in their future classrooms.

For others who had done work with race relations or who had experiences that heightened their awareness of their privileges, the discussions served as a reminder for how much more work there is to be done in our quest for social justice education. One candidate’s journal response exemplifies this.

I noticed this especially in High School as a white minority in a predominantly Latin environment. My best friends were Puerto Rican and Mexican, I was with them when they were arrested and I wasn’t, when they were questioned just for walking down the street at a certain hour, and I wasn’t, when they ran to the nearest exit route at a party due to police arrival and I just stood there wondering why? Even as a sixteen year old, I was aware of my assumed privilege. I began to question then and look deeper into why things were the way they were? How could people judge the friends so close to my heart so harshly? What could I do to change that? (Rachel, European American)

Grappling with one’s sense of identity, justice, and privilege is vital to any practitioner’s process of preparing to teach in underserved communities. Such grappling may bring about feelings of shock, hatred, guilt, or shame, but it is necessary. The Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities course provided space and time for candidates to begin the process early in their educational program.

### ***Identity and Pedagogical Practices***

In their Personal Reflection on Culture and Pedagogy essays, students reflected on the relationship between their social identities and pedagogical practice. The emphasis on the connections between the personal and professional development of beginning teachers was a critical element of the course and yielded introspective writing that provided an examination of issues and the possibility of incorporating future teaching strategies that promote awareness and equity, as seen in the following:

My Jewish identity sparked my commitment to social justice or “tikkun olam,” Hebrew for repair of the world. I will take these ideals with me into the classroom and base my pedagogy on the importance of being involved in the community and giving students a voice and a sense of responsibility. (Esther, European American)

***Affirming Diversity through Social Justice Teaching***

In addition to developing a classroom culture that promotes community involvement, students discussed strategies that they plan to incorporate that affirm diversity and maintain high expectations of all students as ways to promote social justice.

As an aspiring teacher, I would like to stay in the urban setting surrounded by as much diversity as possible so that I may continue to learn from their culture and backgrounds. I find this exciting and engaging and I am eager to be in the classroom exploring varying identities. I believe I will be very non-traditional in my approach to teaching my content area. . . . I am very interested in empowering the youth voice in and outside the classroom. (Esther, European American)

I think that one of the most valuable resources that I took away from my experience at [community organization] is the importance of applying academic rigor to my classroom. It broke my heart to think that lessons were being dumbed down or ineffective because the teaching staff has given up on their students. It is so important to incorporate this aspect of social justice into the classroom. I think that it is often overlooked as a social justice issue. (Sara, European American)

These candidates plan to maintain high expectations for their students by providing them with exposure to rich content and honoring the cultural knowledge that their students will bring with them to the classroom.

***Cultural Connections***

Through the process of naming their social identities, the candidates heightened their awareness of how students view them and how their identities influence their approach to instruction and assessment. They also began to see course content as a vehicle to empower students. In the beginning of the course, most students spoke about their content areas as if they were devoid of political influences. By the end of the course, students began to make the connections between how they approach their subject matter and how the content could be used to support their efforts as social justice educators. This is seen in the writing of one male candidate.

In a matter of months, I will be teaching English to high school students. . . . Obviously, the subject matter offers a number of opportunities for the class to understand different ways to conceive of diversity. Since my own background consists primarily in default social identities (white, middle-class, heterosexual, male), I will encourage my students to interrogate the cultural identities that often operate above scrutiny. . . . I want to move my students away from the notion of literature as art or luxury item, and equip them to recognize discourses of oppression in supposedly

apolitical forms of mass media. (Ryan, European American)

Whether through multicultural or culturally relevant content, candidates began to see the importance of incorporating culture into their pedagogical practices.

### ***Urban Communities as Educational Resources***

In an effort to support student learning, candidates considered integrating local community resources into their instructional practices. The very common realization among the candidates, as seen in their written work, was the invaluable resources provided by the community organizations into which they were placed for their fieldwork. These organizations not only offer resources to the students in the neighborhood school but also often have untapped resources that teachers can use.

As a teacher, I too plan on taking advantage of the resources [the community] has to offer. I think it would be a great idea to build a relationship with a University. [Community organization]'s program has inspired me to take advantage of the cultural resources that the communities have to offer. . . . From these experiences, students will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the cultures about which they are reading, they will be able to place the class text into context, and they will be able to learn about the various cultures that exist right in their own communities. (Laura, European American)

### ***Models of Action***

One candidate described a multitude of ways that she plans to incorporate the community into her classroom and school culture when she begins teaching.

Things like the community tour for the teachers are a way to address these issues so at least they are saying things out loud to the adults they see every day. Setting up peer juries at the high school is a wonderful tool to involve restorative justice practices. Providing more engaging service learning proposals for the students so they become more involved in their community. . . . When the students create videos which are sent to the Board of Ed and our local government it is empowering because they feel they are doing something to ease the burden of their situations. (Esther, European American)

Candidates' exposure to community connections as educational resources became more concrete through their work with community organizations. These experiences also appeared to enhance the candidate's efficacy as an urban teacher. One candidate wrote:

I find it reassuring that programs exist to help students with academics and gain skills I cannot teach them in a school day. After my experiences

in [the community organization], I am relieved to know that resources of all types exist, from educational to social or mental health services. (Julia, European American)

The school and community partnerships in which the candidates took part through their fieldwork provided models of action for effective instructional approaches and school-wide programming that will support their efforts to enact social justice for their students in their teaching.

### ***Mapping Community Assets***

A community-based research project required students to develop asset maps for the community and its organizations. The social capital that the people in the building and community provided was identified as a primary resource in almost every analysis.

The kids I worked with were amazing, but felt limited by the resources in their school. For them to be so successful was an eye opener for both them and me to show that the students and the people in the school are the most important resources. (Denise, European American)

The support of the community for the students was incredible. I was impressed by the number of parent mentors and parent tutors who aided these students in the transitional program and were dedicated to advocate for the diverse needs of these students. (Martha, European American)

The asset mapping process and analysis exposed students to a counter-narrative of apathetic, disengaged families in underserved urban communities. Interacting with parents who volunteer their time after school to work with students in the community helped the teacher candidates debunk the many myths about parents of urban students.

Another benefit of the asset mapping process was that it provided a blueprint of effective practices that preservice teachers could follow whenever they begin working in a new community. As one candidate wrote:

After analyzing their assets and needs, I know now what I need to do when I teach in a community. Simply knowing the community, walking around, keeping my eyes and ears open, can be a huge asset to my teaching. Knowing where the kids come from, knowing where they live and what is outside of the walls of my school is extremely important. You can also find gems that you never knew existed. (Alessandra, Multiracial American)

Through readings, assessments, and fieldwork, many candidates developed self-efficacy, gained an understanding of how broader social and historical issues affect teaching and learning, and were able to evaluate their commitment to working in urban communities. Their reflections

show an understanding of themselves as members of the communities in which they work and of school-community partnerships. Overall, by the end of the course, most of the candidates had reported valuable insight that they could use in their future teaching, which was gained from experiences with the resources available in urban communities.

### Discussion

This study examined the impact of Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities, a new course, on teacher candidates' understanding of social justice, the relationship between identity and pedagogical practices, and resources in urban communities. We found considerable and consistent evidence that the course design, elements, and assignments provided opportunities to learn about, discuss, interact with, and reflect on urban students, schools, and schooling in ways that significantly informed and affected the candidate's approach to his or her future teaching. In this article, connections between identity, beliefs, pedagogy, and social justice in urban communities have been explored in light of how to best prepare the participants to enter schools as change agents in urban educational reform efforts.

#### ***A Balanced Approach to Teacher Preparation for Urban Education***

That field placements in community organizations present opportunities for candidates that have a positive impact on their ability to effectively engage these students is the core message of this study. It underscores the great need to develop teacher preparation programs that provide candidates with experiences with urban students and with communities that lead to transformative teaching practices. Because of these experiences, the participants emerged from their fieldwork with what we argue is not only a more realistic perspective of urban teaching but also a heightened sense of resilience and self-efficacy in regard to their ability to be change agents and to utilize resources in challenging educational settings.

As discussed, taken together, the readings, class discussions, assignments, and community-based field placements played a role in the candidates' developing understanding of the assets and needs of urban students and communities. Working alongside individuals in organizations that are committed to supporting and transforming lives and neighborhoods afforded the participants a rare opportunity to learn from effective practitioners in a real-world context (Anderson & Stillman, 2010). In keeping with this, in the classroom, we modeled practices of

effective urban and culturally responsive teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). We developed the candidates' socio-cultural consciousness and moved them away from deficit-oriented to affirming attitudes toward diversity so that they can begin to see themselves less as technicians and more as agents of change.

### ***Community-Based Placements***

The most important element of this course is its community-based field experience (Anderson & Stillman, 2010; Bondy & Ross, 1998; Epstein et al., 2009; Murrell, 2001; Zeichner et al., 1998). This field experience, coupled with asset mapping (Kretzmann et al., 2005), provides a promising means to build the community outreach skills that urban teachers need to advocate with and for students and to enact social justice pedagogy in their classrooms and school communities. Teacher candidates in this course often moved from skepticism and trepidation about their community placements to an investment in them as part of their development as urban educators. Some made commitments to continue their work with these organizations well beyond the end of the course. This is an important development from our work that we hope to follow up on as we continue conducting research on our program.

### ***Identity and Pedagogy***

The findings of this investigation support previous studies of multicultural preservice experiences and their influence on teacher candidates' worldview, teaching efficacy, and beliefs about self in relation to others (Kyles & Olafson, 2008; Zeichner & McDonald, 2011). The results of this study point to the influential role that social identity plays in teachers' attitudes toward meritocracy, privilege, and expectations as they relate to their pedagogy when working with students in urban schools (Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

For a teacher to effectively contribute to the development of his or her students, the teacher must have a clear sense of identity and how that identity relates to the students in the community within which he or she works (Murrell, 2001). Examining their own cultural identities through cultural autobiographies aided the participants to develop practices that incorporated mutual learning between the teacher and the learner (Donnell, 2007). Teacher candidates need to be involved in discussions and to engage in content that supports their developing, defining, and/or transforming their identities as they relate to schools, schooling, communities, and students. To confront the cultural hegemony that schools and schooling produce, the training of teachers has to include opportunities for them to form and articulate a framework for

understanding the class, cultural, ideological, and gender dimensions that inform classroom life (Giroux & McLaren, 1992).

### ***Preparing Teachers for Social Justice Education***

Efforts to prepare preservice candidates to effectively teach in ways that recognize and value diversity are critical. Every social justice approach to urban education should focus on the personal and professional development of teachers in ways that help to prepare them to work for social justice as professionals and active citizens (James-Wilson, 2007). Several teacher candidates made an important connection between teaching for social justice and the need to include the voices of youth. Their articulation of the vital role that students can play in the education of teachers and in the enactment of social justice in classrooms and communities reflects an emerging area addressed in more recent literature on social justice education (Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007; Donnell, 2007). An understanding of the importance of student voice enriches and expands on our initial goal of raising awareness about the resources that urban communities have to offer teachers and schools. These emerging themes suggest that teacher candidates used their community opportunities to learn from both adults and youth. In these less-structured placements, in which candidates had more contact time with individual and small groups of students than they would in traditional classrooms, many candidates allowed themselves to learn from students, rather than be consumed by the perennial concerns of “controlling students’ behavior and covering content” (Barton & Levstik, 2010, p. 38). The emphasis on service-learning as an instructional strategy for deepening urban students’ connections with their communities likely increased candidates’ awareness of incorporating student voice in teaching and learning.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities was developed to expose teacher candidates to key understandings and components that the literature shows effectively develops candidates’ sense of critical consciousness. The course strengthened our schools’ connections with existing partners and created new partnerships with community organizations across the city. The redesign, which contains an upfront statement that we focus on urban education, has helped us to focus our recruiting and student orientation efforts. As a result, students are responding well to the demands of the course and the program overall.

Teacher preparation programs centered on urban education must endeavor to incorporate opportunities for candidates to experience the

array of resources in urban communities that can support their teaching and their students. There are a variety of activities that could strengthen these efforts, including community-based fieldwork placements, service-learning projects, family involvement activities at local schools, and community asset mapping. The critical factor in pre-service courses is to create opportunities for future teachers to engage with students, families, and communities and experience success in working in urban communities.

Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities appears to be an effective course. However, it covers a vast amount of material and requires a large time commitment from students as well as faculty. We have continued to grapple with questions about the course and the program in general, including how we can modify the course to make it less overwhelming for students but, at the same time, maintain its effectiveness. We also have considered whether other courses in the program sufficiently address the needs of diverse urban students. To address these concerns, we and other faculty in our school recently engaged in a redesign of our entire teacher preparation program. The Teaching and Learning in Urban Communities Course inspired a good deal of the early phase of the program, which includes the modules of community immersion, teaching for social justice, and culturally responsive teaching (LUC, 2013b). We believe that the redesign of our program will enhance the program's focus and provide students with experiences that best prepare them for urban schools.

We also plan to study the implementation of our redesigned program and to follow students as they progress through the program and head out to work in urban schools. We hope to investigate the following question: Did the program prepare them to teach in such schools? This question and the ongoing public concern over the state of our urban schools and the preparation of the teachers who staff them motivate us to continue working to respond to the need for highly skilled and sophisticated educators in urban schools.

### Note

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