Clinical Urban Plunge (CUP): A Collaborative Approach to Promoting the Development of Responsive Middle Level Educators

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ABSTRACT: Teacher candidates benefit from dynamic clinical practices embedded in teacher preparation programs. In this article, we discuss Clinical Urban Plunge (CUP), a clinically-based approach to integrating social justice and equity education in our Middle Level Teaching and Learning Program at Northern Illinois University. More specifically, we explain how our school-university commitment to the preparation of teacher candidates led to the development of CUP, a unique immersion model, observing and participating in various educational and community experiences, including home school visits in the school-university partnership district. We discuss key components of CUP, and share outcomes of this partnership approach.

NAPDS Essentials addressed: 2. A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; 3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants is guided by need. 4. Shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; 5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; and 7. Structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration.

Chartered in 1895, Northern Illinois University first opened its doors in 1899 as the Northern Illinois State Normal School solely to prepare college-educated teachers. Although NIU has a long history of preparing teachers, the formal major in B.S.Ed. in Middle Level Teaching and Learning (MLTL) has only been in existence since 2016. In response to calls for quality middle level teacher preparation in grades 5 to 8 (Alexander & McEwin, 1988; Briggs, 1920; McEwin & Dickinson,1995; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002; NMSA, 2006), the state of Illinois established licensure regulations that required teacher preparation institutions to provide specialized middle level teacher preparation programs beginning in February 2018 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013). As with all of our teacher preparation programs at NIU, our MLTL program committed to providing intensive preparation in content fields, teaching pedagogy, and the clinical setting. In this article, we focus on clinical preparation and explain how our school-university commitment to the preparation of teacher candidates led to the development of Clinical Urban Plunge (CUP), discuss key components of CUP, and share outcomes of this partnership approach.

The Power of the PAC [Essentials 4, 5, 7]

Ongoing communication is essential to a strong school-university partnership. PDS retreats are held annually with PDS faculty coordinators, school district administrators, and teacher liaisons. During the academic year, site council meetings are held in the schools with faculty coordinators and mentor teachers. Key communication for clinical placement procedures occurs between the Director of Teacher Preparation and Development, teacher candidates, Human Resource faculty and administrative leaders at the district and school level.

Additionally, the MLTL program schedules annual Professional Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings that enables continuous exchange leading to the creation of new knowledge, and collective problem solving among school-university partners. The PAC committee is composed of internal members including NIU faculty and administration, teacher candidate representation, clinical supervisors, and external partners including cooperating teachers, MLTL program graduates, and partner district administrators. All members bring unique knowledge and skills that guide and assist program design, development, and implementation. The PAC meeting provides a forum for discussing program updates, current issues, and most importantly, promotes ongoing reflection, collaboration and commitment to innovative practice (Essentials 4, 5, 7).

During a PAC meeting, external advisory committee members communicate ideas to strengthen the MLTL program and school-university partnership by responding to questions such as:

1. Are there areas that our candidates are well prepared for and areas that need more development in?
2. What is happening in the profession that our candidates need to know about?

3. What do our candidates need to know and be prepared for while in their clinical placements?
4. What opportunities for collaboration are available?

While our partners reaffirmed that our candidates were well prepared in their content knowledge including instructional practices, use of technology, etc., it was the following recommendations provided at the annual PAC meeting in April 2018, that prompted the development of CUP:

• Demonstrated understanding of social justice, working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds
• Trauma informed instruction
• Capacity to support students' social-emotional needs; SEL concerns are at an all time high
• Classroom management, including restorative practices

Conceptualization of CUP

At the national level, the focus on how best to prepare teachers has included greater emphasis on clinical preparation. National organizations like the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) have been calling for increased school-university partnerships as the keystone for high quality teacher education (AACTE, 2018). In response to that call, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at NIU implemented a progressive growth model of educator preparation clinical field experiences that increases in duration and opportunity for engagement. During the final four semesters of the MLTL program, teacher candidates participate in intentionally designed field experiences supported by concurrent coursework, and culminating in a year-long connected experience in one of our Professional Development School (PDS) districts. With increased time in their mentor classrooms, candidates participate as contributing members of academic teams, leading to opportunities for expanded collaboration and consistency within our university-school partnerships.

University-school partnerships, in the form of professional development schools, for more than 20 years have been seen as sites of innovation; places where educator learning is able to become connected and intrinsically linked with the learning that occurs in classrooms; locations dedicated to connecting theory with practice (Holmes, 1990). These partnerships, however, are not static entities. Partnerships, if they are viable, continue to evolve, change, and respond to the demands and needs of the school, community, and University partners. Given the recommendations from our PAC meeting in April 2018 and call for social justice and equity education in middle level teacher preparation (Andrews, Moulton, & Hughes, 2018; Cochran-Smith, 2010), we examined how our program aligned with and included such practices. Ludlow, Enterline, and Smith (2008) analyzed both social justice as a theme in education and the assessment of teacher candidates' proficiencies in measurable outcomes, while Harrison, Hurd, and Brinegar (2018), and Brinegar (2015), emphasized cultivating social justice within the

context of middle school curriculum. These studies together highlighted the need to more adequately incorporate social justice in the preparation of middle school teachers. Through reflection and ongoing discussion with our school-university partner, we recognized the opportunity to situate substantive learning experiences in the Second Professional Semester (6th semester) of the MLTL program.

Teacher candidates also need to develop teaching approaches that are social justice oriented. These might include integrating students' diverse cultures into curriculum, creating learning environments to reduce prejudice and oppression, developing equitable pedagogy for all students, incorporating multiple knowledge construction processes, and getting involved in empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2008).

Our collaborative work resulted in CUP designed to better prepare middle grades teacher candidates to meet the diverse needs of adolescent learners. CUP provided opportunities for personal growth and reflection in social justice and equity education through a unique clinical immersion model, observing and participating in various community and educational experiences, including visiting with families in the school-university partnership community.

Candidates had the opportunity to participate in engaged learning experiences beyond the classroom expectations. CUP highlights included:

• Participating in professional development provided by the partner district and community;
• Designing and engaging in co-teaching instructional approaches for teaching diverse young adolescents;
• Visiting organizations and community leaders that introduced candidates to the cultural richness, challenges, and diversity of the partner district community;
• Visiting with a host family in the partner district community; and
• Reflecting on experiences through logs, presentations, etc.

The initial implementation of CUP is summarized in this article. CUP was first piloted in Spring 2019 and included 21 teacher candidates. Figure 1 provides an overview of three key components of CUP: teaching, clinical practice, and research. Integrated together these components created ways to approach social justice and equity education during the Second Professional Semester of our MLTL program.

CUP Model Component 1: Preparing for Teaching

An important design of our MLTL program is the cohort model throughout the professional semesters that begins in semester 4 and continues to the end of the program in semester 8. Within each professional semester, professional courses and clinicals are linked together using an integrative approach to model best practice in middle school education (Harrison, Hurd, & Brinegar, 2019; Jackson & Andrews, 2000; NMSA, 2010).

Diversity and equity education
Interdisciplinary approach
Concurrent coursework
Cohort model

Diverse clinical environment
Theory to practice connections
Professional development seminars

Teaching

Clinical
Practice

CUP

Research

Clinical and community based research
Shared school-university resources
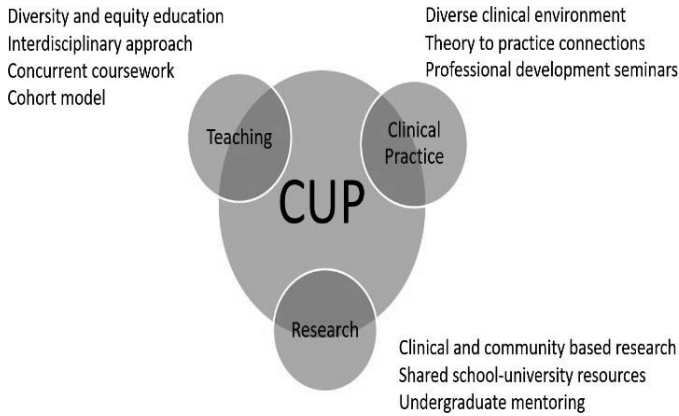Undergraduate mentoring

Figure 1.   Model of CUP Project

Figure 2 indicates professional semester sequence, integrative curricular topics, connected courses and clinicals.

The second professional semester seemed like a logical semester to implement social justice and equity education given the coursework and theme related to adapting instruction for diverse students. Teacher candidates were able to examine their knowledge, intentions, and practices related to social justice and equity and make theory to practice connections while in their clinical placements (Bell, 1997). Because of the design of the coursework in the second professional semester and our partnership with a diverse school district, it allowed for powerful professional development learning opportunities and innovative practices as part of the second component of CUP, clinical practice (Figure 3 displays components of clinical practice).

Semester	Semester 4	Semester 5	Semester 6	Semester 7	Semester 8
	Pre-Professional	First Professional	Second Professional	Third Professional	Student Teaching
Topic	Early Adolescent Development	Content Area Literacy	Adapting Instruction for Diverse Students	Co-teaching and Assessment	Student Teaching and edTPA
Concurrent Courses	EPS 300 - Educational Psychology EPS 419 - The Middle School Child	LTRE 311- Content Area Literacy Instruction SESE 457 - Methods for Including Middle and Secondary Students with Exceptionalities in the General Education Classroom	LTIC 420 - Methods and Materials for Teaching English Language Learners in the Content Areas TLCI 422 – Middle School Organization and Instruction	EPS 452- Classroom Management for Adolescent Students ETRA 422 - Technology and Assessment for Secondary Education	MLTL 461- Seminar in Middle Level Student Teaching

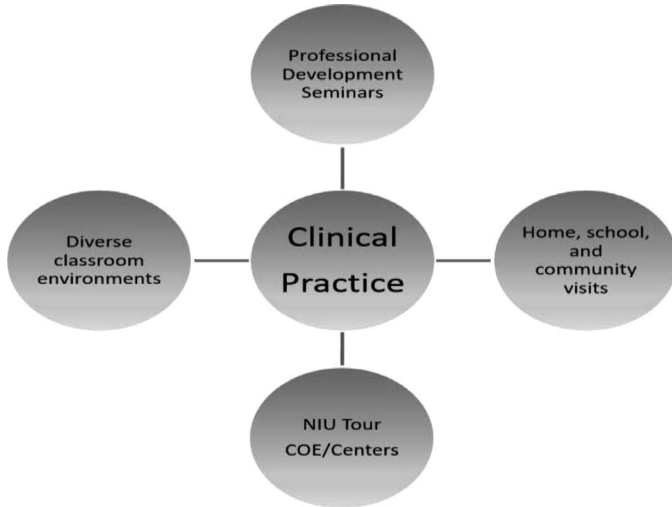Figure 2.   Professional Semester Theme Linked Courses and Clinicals

Figure 3.   CUP Model Component 2 - Clinical Practice

CUP Model Component 2: Clinical Practice [Essentials 2, 3]

Diverse Classroom Environment. In keeping with the call from NAPDS and CAEP for increased clinical experiences (Bazemore-Bertrand, 2019), our program includes a clinical progression model. Over the course of the two-year program, candidates engage in 900 hours in middle school classrooms. Also integral to our clinical progression model is intentional placement in diverse middle school settings (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002/2016; NCES, 2002). The Office of Teacher Preparation and Development in the College of Education ensures all teacher candidates have diverse experiences with grades 5-8 learners. In the second professional semester, candidates are placed in partnership District U46 with high proportions of minority students, English Language Learners and low socio-

economic (SES) students (See Figure 4). District U46 is an urban district that serves nearly 39,000 children in grades preK-12 in 11 communities. District U46 ranks as the second largest in Illinois with 40 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and five high schools. District U46 also reflected district initiatives, goals, supports, and instructional practices of social justice and equity education.

Reflection logs from our teacher candidates (n=21) while observing and teaching during their clinical experience in Spring 2019 highlighted the challenges they were facing in middle school classrooms in District U46.

- "Students swear at each other or the teacher."
- "There was one student that did not want to work."
- "Many cannot keep to themselves for longer than 30 seconds at a time."
- "They feel the need to outburst, be loud, disruptive, and disrespectful."
- "One student who occasionally does not get sleep at home will often come to class tired."
- "There is a student during our fourth period class who misbehaves and he pounds on the desk with his pencils, lays down, talks out of turn and swears."
- "In one classroom period there is one student that is disruptive in class all the time."
- "One student possibly has some form of ADHD and will often spend time at his desk dancing instead of working."

Knowing these challenges, we saw the need to provide ongoing professional development support for our candidates [Essential 3].

Professional Development. One influential professional development opportunity occurred through seminars. For example, candidates participated in training on the McKinney- Vento

STUDENT ENROLLMENT						Native Hawaiian /Pacific Islander	American Indian	Two or More Races	Children with Disabilities	English Learners	Low Income	Homeless
	All	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian							
School	689	78	56	511	18	*	3	23	123	241	541	14
		11.3%	8.1%	74.2%	2.6%	*	0.4%	3.3%	17.9%	35.0%	78.5%	2.0%
District	38,395	9,967	2,434	21,091	3,184	47	362	1,310	6,779	12,872	23,260	655
		26.0%	6.3%	54.9%	8.3%	0.1%	0.9%	3.4%	17.7%	33.5%	60.6%	1.7%
State	1,984,519	944,451	331,838	523,306	102,113	2,061	5,067	75,683	364,698	241,093	968,570	39,579
		47.6%	16.7%	26.4%	5.1%	0.1%	0.3%	3.8%	18.4%	12.1%	48.8%	2.0%

Student Enrollment is based on <u>Serving School</u>.
Children with Disabilities are those students eligible to receive special education services through an IEP or support through a 504 plan.
English Learners are students eligible for transitional bilingual programs.

Low Income are students who receive or live in households that receive SNAP or TANF; are classified as homeless, migrant, runaway, Head Start, or foster children; or live in a household where the household income meets the USDA income guidelines to receive free or reduced-price meals.
Homeless students are those who do not have permanent and adequate homes.

Figure 4.   Sample Middle School Demographics

Homeless Assistance Act provided by District U46 personnel. Federal and state law mandates that every school district in the nation appoint a homeless liaison to recruit and service homeless students in their district. District U46 further created a program named Project Access, and explained the program to our candidates during the seminar. During CUP, Project Access identified and serviced approximately 775 homeless students. In addition to the U46 led professional development seminar, NIU hosted a staff member from the DeKalb Regional Office of Education for a seminar on trauma informed instruction. We also invited the director of NIU's Disability Resource Center (DRC) who discussed applicable laws and regulations for educators on disabilities and strategies for creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment. NIU faculty and program committee members also benefited from attending these professional development seminars. Additionally, MLTL program committee members participated in article study sessions during monthly program meetings using adapted protocols commonly used for book study sessions in Professional Learning Communities. Specifically, committee members read selected articles on social justice, trauma, and equity from resources such as the *Middle School Journal* and shared their responses to the following prompts:

1. What new ideas or VIPs (very important points) did you discover in your reading?
2. What questions would you like to ask the group about the reading?
3. What new ideas about social justice education might we consider in our MLTL program?
4. Give suggestions for next steps or action.

NIU Campus Tour. College visits on our campus are regular for high school students who are seeking to finalize their admission process to NIU. We were surprised, however, to learn that many of our partnership middle school students had never visited campus even when it is in walking distance from their homes. We decided to extend this opportunity to U46 middle school students as part of CUP, which included a walking tour of campus to see various buildings, classrooms, and see life of college students while in session. Unique to the campus visit was working with our Office of Academic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to arrange tours of our

Cultural Resource Centers. These included the Asian American Center, Center for Black Studies, Gender & Sexuality Resource Center, and Latino Resource Center. All Centers support NIU's mission for establishing an inclusive community environment, and provide support for diverse student populations and help them succeed in their educational goals through interdisciplinary academic programs, academic and professional resources, and social gatherings and events.

Overall, professional development was ongoing for various participants including MLTL program committee members; faculty and instructors; university supervisors; teacher candidates; and members from our school-university partner.

Home, School, and Community Visits. A final key feature associated with the clinical practice component of CUP was participating in home and school visits of families in District U46. Home school visits provide an opportunity for teachers and families to build relationships and expand teachers' knowledge of each student's home life and cultural background (Faber, 2015; Kronholz, 2016; Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Understanding the importance of home school visits, we decided to pilot this approach with our teacher candidates. In collaboration with District U46 staff, teachers, and community members, we developed a schedule during NIU's spring break for our teacher candidates to visit with families in District U46. Three families enrolled in Project Access volunteered. Three of the 21 NIU teacher candidates volunteered for this pilot experience. One day was designed for an orientation meeting at District U46 to review profiles of the families and children, share the schedule and route of travel, and discuss expectations during the visits including completing a reflection log (See Appendix A). Each day included three visits to the host family, visits to the school(s) of the children, and meetings with school staff and members of a community organization. See Figure 5 for a sample daily schedule. At the conclusion of the home school visits experience, one teacher candidate, Maya engaged in a research study, created posters describing her project, and shared her results in various venues.

CUP Model Component 3: Engaging in and Disseminating Results [Essentials 2, 5]

A final activity associated with CUP was engaging in and disseminating results. Maya engaged in undergraduate research and shared her results with her peers and professional educators at multiple settings. NIU's MLTL program faculty shared results of CUP at local, regional, and national levels.

- *Conference presentations.* Maya presented at NIU's Undergraduate Research and Artistry Day, NIU's College of Education Student Research Symposium, and at the Illinois State Capitol as part of the Illinois Innovation Network's "Posters Under the Dome." MLTL colleagues presented on CUP at the NAPDS annual conference in 2020.
- *PDS and program meetings.* Maya prepared a powerpoint presentation on her CUP experience and discussed results at the annual MLTL PAC meeting in April 2019 and during a seminar session for her peers enrolled in the MLTL 303 clinical experience.
- *Interconnect forum.* MLTL colleagues presented on CUP at an Interconnect meeting, which allows District U46 and partnership universities and colleges to connect with one another, discuss current topics and determine how to support the mission and vision shared among the institutions, which include the preparation of future educators.

Time	Schedule and Location
6:30-8:00 AM	Home Visit Family #1
8:30-11:00 AM	School Visits, Classroom Observation, and Interviews with Administrators and Support Personnel
11:00-1:00	Lunch Break and Reflection
1:15-2:15 PM	Community Crisis Center, Elgin
5:00 PM	Home Visit
5:00-7:00 PM	Dinner Break and Reflection
7:00-9:00 PM	Home Visit

Figure 5.   Sample Home School Visit Schedule

In the following section, we consider written reflections and results from a new survey to capture feedback on the experiences of teacher candidates during CUP. While we do collect formal measures of performance outcome data throughout our program, we recognize the need to collect additional data to allow us to better monitor CUP outcomes and impact, and consider implications and future direction.

Preliminary Outcomes of CUP

All 21 teacher candidates completed a written reflection at the conclusion of the professional development seminar on trauma-informed instruction. These reflections provided insight into candidates' new understandings of trauma:

- While sitting through the presentation on trauma, I was shocked. I had never really thought about all the different home scenarios my students could be in, from living in a car or motel, to running away from home. Not all students have a stable home situation. Now I know the warning signs and ways to help students with trauma and I am glad that I can do my part to help these students.
- It was shocking to know that 85% of students fall into tier one. Knowing this will help me better assess situations. Allowing students to de-escalate and regulate before solving the issue at hand is something I never thought about.
- I learned that there are three main categories for adverse childhood experiences that can result in trauma: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction.
- I think one of the most important things (while everything was of course important) that I learned from the presentation is that "discipline is to teach, not to punish," and "discipline should happen through the context of relationship."
- From the presentation, I realized I saw a lot of interventions, supports, and strategies used in practice

when I participated in the home-school-visits. We met a student who had suffered trauma due to homelessness, parental separation, and parental incarceration. They understood his background, would ensure that he was de-escalating with staff that had a good relationship with him and even had a quiet space at his school to calm down.

Additionally, the teacher candidates consistently highlighted several trauma-informed educational practices that they would use to foster positive relationships, and create a safe, inclusive classroom environment:

- In my classroom, I would incorporate movement and a calming corner with the most comfortable chair I could find. This would be a place that I would let students listen to music or read a book to calm down.
- As a future teacher, I vow to create that safe environment, where all my students can be themselves and feel safe.
- My biggest takeaways are to understand my students and their backgrounds and to make sure that I understand their problems before I make a decision.
- Letting students listen to music is something that I am a strong advocate for because it allows students to zone out and relax for a while.
- One practice I look to implement in my classroom is an area where a student can go to de-escalate. This can be an area with an alterntive seat that is comfy, books available for reading, and music to help them regulate.
- I want to have an environment where students can be fed, be warm, and be a child.

To gain insight about knowledge gained and personal and professional impact from participating in the home-school community visit experience, we developed an 11-item survey using a 5 point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Undecided; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. To date, 3 candidates have participated in the home-school community visit

experience part of CUP. Overall, these candidates responded positively to the experience as indicated by responding either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to survey items. Some sample statements include:

- This experience increased my understanding of teaching and learning in a diverse setting.
- This experience increased my understanding of the rationale for developmentally responsive and socially equitable teaching and learning.
- This experience will benefit me as I continue my middle level educator preparation program.

Additionally, candidates were asked to respond to open-ended questions. When asked "What part of this experience was the most beneficial to you?" it was evident that they expressed empathy and gained awareness of the inequities and challenges students face. One candidate commented, "Getting to know students outside of school helped me to understand behaviors that show up in the classroom that I cannot simply discipline out of them. There is more going on in the children's lives than they may ever tell us. There is a whole life outside of what we see in 45 minutes after students leave us." Another replied, "It was a harsh realization when you actually see and experience the struggles these families go through every day." Finally, candidates provided us with suggestions for improving overall logistics of the home-school-community experience and recommended extending the opportunity to as many other candidates as possible. Overall, this snapshot into candidates' experiences with CUP highlights their continued growth and transformation. As one candidate expressed, "this experience was truly life changing. I cannot stress how much it has changed my life."

Reflecting and Looking Forward [Essential 4]

Clinical Urban Plunge (CUP) is grounded in a strong school-university partnership model and impacted preservice teachers and supported middle level teacher preparation through:

- Awareness and potential use of core practices for responsive middle level teaching (SEL, ACES, Trauma);
- Development of empathy as a middle level educator;
- Theory to practice connections; and
- Understanding of the roles of teachers, family, and community.

Teacher candidates reflected on their professional growth goals so that they can create intellectually, academically, emotionally, and physically safe school and classroom environments that are inviting, inclusive, and supportive of all.

> I hope to create a kind of classroom where my students feel safe to learn. I hope to do this by being culturally sensitive and connecting with my students on a personal level. I hope to know how to support all levels of learners and create a classroom that is student driven in order to foster a want to

learn attitude within them. I hope to encourage active learning that will ensure every student feels valued.
> —Reflection from Middle Level Teacher Candidate

> Creating an environment that is safe for all of the following factors: intellectual, academic, emotional, and physical is something that is extremely important for all teachers and administrators. Without it, students will not be able to focus all of their attention on their school work which is the reason why they are at the school to begin with. Once a safe environment for the students has been established, it is the responsibility of the teacher to foster a learning environment that is inviting, inclusive, and supportive of all students.
> —Reflection from Middle Level Teacher Candidate

Cultivating rich clinical experiences such as CUP takes time, effort, and strong collaboration with a school-university partner. CUP encourages teacher-candidates to get acquainted with students, families, and communities. The project also requires teacher- candidates to observe, critique, and reflect on the integration of curriculum content in their clinical placements. This article provides a preliminary snapshot of how a school-university partnership can work together to develop meaningful, transformative clinical experiences.

The investment in our school-university partnership has set high expectations for continuation and expansion of CUP, and anticipates creation of even more positive learning opportunities and unique clinical experiences. Due to COVID-19, we were limited with implementing a second iteration of CUP. In the future, it is our goal to make the home-school visit component of CUP accessible to all teacher candidates enrolled in MLTL 303 during spring semesters. However, we realize that not all candidates may be able to dedicate such time during their university spring break, and that we have to rely on families in the school district to host such visits. We still aim to make home-school visits an option to interested candidates and families. Finally, we recognize the need to develop and implement additional measures to collect data in the future. For example, we plan to administer The Learning to Teach for Social Justice Beliefs scale (Ludlow, Enterline, & Cochran-Smith, 2008) as an entry and exit survey as a measurable outcome for CUP. Overall, the MLTL program strives to investigate and refine ways we can continue to enhance our school-university partnership and preparation of responsive middle level educators who will become justice-oriented, change agents in our communities. SUP

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Appendix A

MLTL 303: Clinical Urban Plunge (CUP) Home Visit Reflection Log

Purpose: to develop understandings of the social, cultural, and economic contexts of the child and how those contexts relate to and impact the school context

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Student/Family #1:
What did you learn about the student and their family culture?
What did you learn about the child (interests, significant experiences, upcoming events, strengths, perceived learning needs, interactions with others)?
How will you engage students in a more meaningful way during classroom instruction, or families in a more meaningful partnership?
Reflective Notes/Other Observations: