

REEXAMINING PITFALLS OF EXPERIENCE IN URBAN TEACHER PREPARATION

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Abstract

Over 30 years ago, Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) wrote about “pitfalls of experience” in teacher education. In the current study, I share vignettes of three student teachers engaged in an urban teacher preparation program to highlight how these pitfalls are still operating—and are arguably even more problematic—as we prepare teachers to work with minoritized youth. I add additional detail to the familiarity pitfall and also suggest the existence of a new *standardization* pitfall. I end with cautions for teacher educators and a call for reimagined student teaching experiences as we consider these and other pitfalls in the preparation of teachers for urban settings.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education, urban education, Praxis

I am constantly trying to instruct students who are more concerned about the latest athletic shoe than the fact that they cannot multiply and divide. – Jennifer’s week 6 post

I am sitting in a huge classroom with over 100 middle schoolers, watching Yolanda teach... I look around and see black and brown children learning that mathematics is about rote memorization... – Stephanie’s field notes

Each student will be given a bag of fruit snacks. Students will open the fruit snacks and group them by flavor. The students will proceed to determine the ratios shown in the package. – Excerpt from Michaela’s lesson plan

Introduction

The excerpts above come from a larger study focused on teacher candidates’ experiences throughout student teaching. Jennifer, Yolanda, and Michaela² are struggling, to varying degrees, to create and enact engaging curriculum for their students—primarily Black and Brown youth—who are attending urban intensive or urban characteristic schools (Milner, 2012). Utilizing Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann’s (1985) “pitfalls of experience” in teacher education, I first make sense of the struggles these student teachers face in the field, and then further explicate the notion of pitfalls of experience in *urban settings*.

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² All names are pseudonyms.

Conceptual Framework

Student teaching is a widely accepted component of pre-service teacher education (Anderson & Stillman, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Some researchers, however, question the role that practicum plays in pre-service teachers’ learning. For example, Grudnoff (2011) found that “although first-year teachers consistently viewed the practicum as a very important part of their preparation for teaching, their practicum experiences did not always prepare them adequately for entry into the profession” (p. 229). Learning to teach in urban settings may be even more complex; in their review of studies on the role of field placements in learning to teach, Grossman, Ronfeldt, and Cohen (2011) found that “learning to teach in urban schools can be extremely challenging, in some cases perpetuating negative attitudes and even reducing the likelihood that teachers will continue to work in similar kinds of settings” (p. 318).

These complexities in learning to teach may be related, in part, to the “pitfalls of experience” in teacher education (outlined in Table 1) that Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) wrote about more than 30 years ago.

Table 1: Pitfalls of Experience (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985)

Pitfall	Description of experience
Two-worlds pitfall	The two-worlds pitfall arises from the fact that teacher education goes on in two distinct settings and from the fallacious assumption that making connections between these two worlds is straightforward and can be left to the novice (p. 63).
Cross-purposes pitfall	The cross-purposes pitfall arises from the fact that classrooms are not setup for teaching teachers (p. 63). The legitimate purposes of teachers center on their classrooms, which generally are not designed as laboratories for learning to teach (p. 62).
Familiarity pitfall	The familiarity pitfall stems from the tendency to trust what is most memorable in personal experience.... Ideas and images of classrooms and teachers laid down through many years as a pupil provide a framework for viewing and standards for judging what [is seen] now (p. 56).

Paying careful attention to these pitfalls is still useful today, especially as we consider placements in urban settings. In fact, in a recent review of studies centered on student teaching, Ronfeldt (2015) found that “schools that were lower performing, harder to staff, less collaborative, and had more historically marginalized students were more likely than other schools to be used as field placements” (p. 311). If this is the case, it seems especially important to consider, and expand upon, pitfalls of experience in these settings.

Context and Methods

Data for this study comes from 23 written reflections and lesson plans from student teachers enrolled in a teacher certification program committed to preparing teachers to teach in urban settings. Faculty teaching in the program, including me, take seriously the college's mission to prepare educators who are “empowered to serve as change agents; committed to and respectful of all learners; and engaged with learners, their families, schools, and local and global communities.” Course readings throughout the program include Freire (1970) and Ladson-Billings (1997), in addition to texts that focus on multicultural education (i.e., Spring, 2008), white privilege, the school-to-prison pipeline, bilingual education, power and politics in school, etc. In addition to course readings, students engage with local foundations (for example, all of our students work with an organization that supports students of incarcerated parents), write about the impact of their own ideologies on their teaching practices, and create lesson plans with critical pedagogy at the center. Most teacher candidates appear to “talk the talk” around issues of equity and critical pedagogies prior to student teaching, but I was particularly interested to see how things played out in practice.

Preliminary analysis across the entire set of data revealed that most student teachers did not write about problems of practice related to critical pedagogies and most often did not implement these strategies and lessons in the field (see: Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, in review). In order to look more closely at what these results meant for teacher education, I identified three student teachers who appeared to struggle with the pitfalls of experience as outlined by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) and wrote vignettes—“narrative snippets that crystalize illustrative issues in the field [that are] framed by the writer to make an interpretive point” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 213)—based on their reflections and my field notes to further flesh out their experiences. Below I share a small portion of those vignettes and then discuss what their experiences might mean for pitfalls in urban teacher preparation.

Student Teaching in Urban Settings

Vignette #1:

I just observed Michaela teach her second lesson for the semester. Her lesson plan had three stated goals for students: to know three ways to write ratios, to understand scale up and scale down, and to use ratios to make accurate predictions. After a 10-minute lecture she gave students fruit snacks and asked them to answer questions like, “What is the ratio of lemon to grape?” and “What is the ratio of orange to the entire bag of fruit snacks?” The girls (all students of color in a gender-divided charter academy) listened, took notes, and then did their work with the fruit snacks. The bell rang and they filed out for their next class.

I sit and wonder what feedback to give. Michaela thought the lesson went well. I made some comments about good classroom management and good repertoire with the girls as she walked me to the door. But as I sit here now I know I need to say more and I put this note on her observation form: “Think back to your curriculum class. What other contexts might be more relevant to your students? Why fruit snacks? Could you, instead, look at population data in our city by race and gender, ask your girls to predict who gets pulled over more frequently by police, and then take a look at the real data? This helps them think about ratios and proportions...and

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racial profiling in their communities.” I am left wondering if what we are doing in our coursework around critical pedagogies is enough...

Vignette #2:

It is a few weeks later and I am sitting in a long, narrow computer lab—one classroom space where four had been previously—watching another student teacher, Yolanda, teach. She is placed in a school that utilizes computer-based, self-paced mathematics curriculum for instruction. I watched Yolanda teach a 30-minute review lesson to 7 Black boys and 2 Black girls; she told me earlier that she only knew one of them. I looked out at approximately 100 other students in the lab space and wondered how many others Yolanda did not know. How could she possibly get to know everyone in this room?

Yolanda’s 9 students had been “flagged” based on a printout Yolanda received last night at 5pm, as needing additional instruction on dividing decimals. I see two other teachers with groups of students at whiteboards across the room and I wonder about their flags....I watch as Yolanda demonstrates how to divide decimals and then prompts students to practice. I am unsure what to type on my observation form. Yolanda is doing what the other teachers in this space have been asked to do. But is this what is really best for her students?

Vignette #3:

A few weeks later I sit down to read through my student teachers’ dilemmas of practice. One of their assignments this semester was to post concerns to a shared online space and then meet virtually in small groups to talk through their dilemmas. I do not participate in the bi-weekly calls, but I do respond to the posts. I am late with my feedback, again, so I scan Jennifer’s post quickly:

I’ve been in the classroom for three months. Seeing the day-to-day realities of the educational system have been disheartening, to say the least. I am constantly trying to instruct students that are more concerned about the latest athletic shoe than the fact that they cannot multiply and divide. The students also come from extremely difficult home environments. Rather than striving for a way out, they seem content to continue the cycle of their families. Granted, they are only 11 and 12 years old, but they have to realize that their futures are very dim if they do not put forth any effort towards their education...

I type this first: “What in your lesson plan makes your students want to engage? You don’t have a textbook, so make your lesson about athletic shoes. Have you talked to your students? Do you know their families? Do you know their communities? Do you really know them?” I want to type more, but I delete it instead. I close my computer and think about my own course: What am I doing to help my pre-service teachers understand the importance of getting to know their students? And even if they understand the importance, are we providing them with time and space for that work during student teaching?

Discussion

Difficulties Learning across Two Distinct Settings

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As Feiman-Nemser and Buchman (1985) describe, pre-service teachers need guidance in recognizing how what they have learned as university students can help shape their perspectives and practices as teachers (the two-worlds pitfall). My student teachers struggled to make these connections. For example, Michaela appeared to be teaching just as she had been taught (and modeling the moves of her mentor teacher), even though she had designed more critical lessons in courses with me. Jennifer similarly struggled as she moved from coursework to the field. In class with me, Jennifer talked about things like the myth of meritocracy and spoke out against the deficit views of children that some teachers bring to the classroom; once in the field, she appeared to fall back into deficit views of her students, quite possibly without even realizing it.

Urban Classrooms not set up as Sites for Teacher Learning

The “cross-purposes” pitfall suggests that there is a frequent disconnect between the responsibility of teaching and the need for critical reflection on teaching, and that classrooms are not set-up for teaching teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985). This pitfall is evident in all three cases shared above. For example, during my debrief sessions with Michael and Yolanda, neither talked about what their students might be learning beyond the discrete mathematics standards they were asked to cover. Thinking about critical pedagogies and opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness were absent from these spaces. Similarly, Jennifer did not appear to be critically reflecting on her teaching, on her relationships (or lack there of) with her students, or on her own ideologies and past experiences that might be impacting how she views children and families. There appeared to be little time and space available for this work.

Missed Opportunities to Challenge what is Familiar and Unfamiliar

Feiman-Nemser and Buchman’s (1985) “familiarity pitfall” highlights the idea that people, including future teachers, “do not recognize that their experience is limited and biased” and that we tend to “trust what is most memorable in personal experience” (p. 56). The pre-service teachers in my study experienced the familiarity pitfall as they brought ideas and images from their own schooling experiences to practicum work. We see this in Michaela’s case; she was not given a set of curriculum materials to use so she drew upon her experience as a student in past mathematics classrooms, along with images of her mentor teacher’s instruction, to design and implement very traditional mathematics lessons absent of culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Paris, 2013) and lessons that might provide students and teachers opportunities to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

I further argue that some student teachers placed in urban settings and working with minoritized youth also experience an “unfamiliarity” pitfall. For example, Jennifer, a mid-30’s White woman, felt frustrated when her students were not engaged in her lessons in order to “strive for a way out.” It is likely that Jennifer’s notion of engagement and classroom participation looks and feels different based on her own past schooling experiences. Digging more deeply into some of Jennifer’s posts across the semester, it became clear that she was not familiar with her students, or their families, or the community within which she was teaching. This “unfamiliarity” pitfall appeared to contribute to her deficit views of children and families. Although we provided a space for Jennifer to read about these things during coursework, there

appeared to be limited opportunities for her to come to know families and communities in authentic and deep ways during her fieldwork.

A New Pitfall: Standardization

My work points to one final pitfall—the standardization pitfall. This data indicates that pre-service teachers are placed in urban classrooms where processes and curriculum are standardized. One could argue that this *could* be useful if mentor teachers in placement schools are using an innovative curriculum or engaging in a lesson plan development process that leads to culturally responsive/sustaining teaching. My student teachers, however, found themselves using either a whole-school reform curriculum/process that had been standardized and had very little to do with students funds of knowledge (Yolanda), or were faced with county mandates that dictated which standards each teacher should be teaching each day, week, or grading period (Michaela and Jennifer). Pacing charts such as these decrease teachers' autonomy and ability to create longer units based on students interests and aimed towards sustaining students' varied cultures and languages. Our student teachers additionally faced standardization of the teacher education curriculum. All three teacher candidates were very concerned about their upcoming edTPA portfolios and spent much of their time planning for and thinking about that standardized assessment, leaving little time for much else. As Michaela suggested when discussing an upcoming seminar associated with student teaching, "if it doesn't have anything to do with edTPA, I will not be listening."

Conclusion and Implications

The pitfalls of experience in teacher education, as highlighted by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985), are still operating today. The stories shared above highlight that these pitfalls of experience are operating in urban settings, and may in fact be more troubling and problematic. As urban teacher educators, we need to be extraordinarily alert to the two-worlds pitfall and continue to consider ways to engage our pre-service teachers in critical pedagogies that they find immediately applicable; we want these critical tools to be employed during student teaching and not viewed as a latent theory of critical pedagogy that may or may not manifest during and after student teaching. Similarly, we need to ensure that our student teachers have a chance to reflect critically on their own teaching and ideologies, especially when placed in urban schools. What was noticeably absent from Jennifer's experience in particular was what Conway and Clark (2003) term an "inward" journey, a shift from concerns related to personal capacity towards concerns about growing as a teacher and person. The cross-purposes pitfall within teacher education speaks to this lack of time and space for the critical reflection needed when working with traditionally minoritized students. Finally, as suggested above, teacher candidates may not push back against traditional forms of instruction, especially if that is what they are familiar with from their own K-12 experience, and therefore miss opportunities to develop lessons that respond to and sustain students' cultures.

In addition to the pitfalls suggested by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985), I suggest that student teachers in urban placements, particularly privileged White female teachers teaching youth of color, may also struggle with an "unfamiliarity" pitfall; their lack of knowledge of the children they are teaching, along with their families and communities, may further perpetuate deficit views. Most student teachers are heavily burdened by university coursework and part-

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time *paying* jobs outside of schools on top of very demanding student teaching schedules. If we do not consider this, and make more room for teacher candidates to get to know their students and communities, this “unfamiliarity” pitfall (and the damaging views of children and families that go along with it) will continue during student teaching. We must ask ourselves what we can do to create space for student teachers to engage with students and families in different and more meaningful ways. Finally, I suggest that we are additionally faced with a standardization pitfall in teacher education, particularly in urban settings. Teacher candidates are increasingly placed in schools where a standardized curriculum or pacing chart has been adopted. These restrictive curriculums not only impact the professionalism of practicing teachers, but also severely limit pre-service teachers opportunities to learn with and about their students. Alongside this, teacher candidates are additionally faced with standardized teacher education assessments (edTPA) that dictate much of their focus during student teaching. It is not surprising that teacher candidates cannot enact the critical pedagogies they learn about in their teacher education coursework. We must consider, as teacher educators, what it means for teacher candidates to operate within increasingly standardized spaces in K-12 and higher education. This may mean reconsidering placements where very standardized or scripted curriculums are in place and also introducing earlier field placements that are not connected to edTPA. When selectivity and flexibility regarding placements is not an option, we then need to open up time and space for curriculum development and enactment *outside* of classrooms in spaces like after-school clubs and community-based organizations.

In the end, these pitfalls, no matter what we name them, appear to get in the way of teacher candidates really getting to know their students and then drawing on what they have learned throughout their teacher education coursework to design innovative and relevant curriculum for *their particular students*. So, I leave you with this: These pitfalls of teacher education still exist, more have been added, and likely more are still to come. We need to fully understand how these pitfalls operate in our teacher education spaces; be explicit about these pitfalls with one another, with mentor teachers, and with our teacher candidates; and then make the necessary changes to the overall structure of student teaching to try to avoid them. As suggested above, good *first* steps include providing more time and opportunities for student teachers to (1) reflect on their own ideologies while in the field (and not just during coursework), (2) come to know students and families in more intimate and deep ways, and (3) search out curriculum development opportunities outside standardized placements. However, my guess is that we need to think *way* outside the box when attempting to address these pitfalls and reconsider the entire structure of student teaching. I will be thinking... and I hope you will join me.

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