

# Using Critical Reflection to Improve Urban Teacher Preparation: A Collaborative Inquiry of Three Teacher Educators

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## ABSTRACT

*This collaborative inquiry examines the ways new teachers are being prepared as critical reflective practitioners in three urban teacher education programs. Researching individually and collectively, the research team analyzes and compares pedagogical methods and program features for preparing new teachers for urban schools. Their findings detail how each teaching method impacted preservice teachers' capacity to do critical reflection. The researchers recommend working with dilemmas, following structured protocols, and practicing collaborative inquiry as means to teaching critical reflection. They also recognize the need to continually develop their own explicit frameworks for critical reflection.*

## INTRODUCTION

Urban teacher education programs are being asked to prepare teachers to take on “unprecedented responsibilities” and “unmet challenges” (NCATE, 2010, p. 1). Knowing the content of the curriculum is not enough when teachers are expected “to educate all children—including those from increasingly diverse economic, racial, linguistic, and academic backgrounds” (p. 1). New teachers must be able to respond to students’ cognitive and social-emotional needs; they have to know the communities around the schools and apply knowledge of child growth and development; they have to be experts at assessment, with strategies for monitoring students’ progress and engaging them in learning. Overall, new teachers need collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills to be fully prepared for the uncertainties and challenges they will face in 21st century classrooms.

In our own practice as teacher educators preparing new teachers for the complexity of urban schools, we worked to build the reflective and communication skills of our preservice teachers so they could carefully observe, analyze, diagnose, design, and evaluate teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2008). We believed that our own teaching and the field experiences in our programs enabled our

students to see that practice and reflection go hand-in-hand. Our preservice teachers implemented teaching and assessment strategies, monitored student progress, and adjusted lesson plans to improve student learning. But we were troubled by what happened when these students encountered the intractable conditions of urban schooling, such as accountability systems, scripted curriculum, labels, and institutionalized racism. Our students tended to acquiesce to the inequities in the classrooms or schools. Their deficit views showed through as they blamed students, parents, and teachers for what caused them difficulty in the classroom.

To help our students get beyond a sense of powerlessness as teachers in urban schools, we experimented with ways to teach not just reflection, but *critical reflection*. We wanted our students to question their own roles in the reproduction of inequitable schooling (Malarkey, 2005). Through critical reflection, we wanted to help students develop the ability to look beyond their own experience to those of other teachers and schools and to consider how they are being positioned by larger political, social and economic systems (Zeichner, 1996). We believed our students needed to understand and name the systems of oppression that keep poor and minority learners from accessing the “American Dream”

(Noguera, 2003) and to challenge unexamined assumptions and develop the agency to work with their students, colleagues, and communities to counteract these barriers to education.

In our own careers, the ability to reflect critically developed through our involvement in collaborative inquiry. In the 1990’s, we each worked with school-based “critical friends groups” associated with school reform efforts based on the *Ten Common Principles* of the Coalition of Essential Schools (Cushman, 1999). One outcome of this work was a model for collaborative inquiry shown here and explained in detail in a dissertation by James Kilbane (2007).

This model (Kilbane, 2007) shows that collaborative inquiry is an ongoing process that vacillates between collaborative and personal inquiry. For example, the collaborative inquiry project we discuss in this article began when we met to discuss our teaching and one of us brought a request for journal manuscripts about reflective practice in teacher education. We thought the journal editors posed some provocative questions. (We were *Accepting Invitations* in the collaborative inquiry model.) We left our meeting with a plan to do some personal journaling about our own teaching of reflective practice (*Personal Focusing*).

When we reconvened (*Collective Focusing*), we learned that each of us

was implementing an instructional strategy we had learned and used successfully with teachers as school reform coaches (*Life Experiences*). Randy was focused on asking probing questions; Sue was experimenting with multiple protocols; and Beth was asking students to reflect on dilemmas that presented themselves in student teaching. Over the next year, we each collected and analyzed data (*Analyzing and Collecting Data*), discussed our findings (*Discussing with Colleagues*), and completed the last four steps in the process as we started writing this article, getting peer review, and finalizing our shared thoughts for publication.

This collaborative inquiry is an instance of “inquiry as stance” as it is described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). We conducted our research not only to inform the field, but also to generate local knowledge about how to improve our personal teaching and our teacher education programs. Toward that end, we studied the impact of the three instructional strategies (1. probing questions, 2. protocols, 3. dilemmas) on the learning of our preservice teachers, with a special interest in finding out how these strategies influenced our students’ development of critical reflection.

## RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND METHODOLOGIES: THREE CASE STUDIES

In this section, we present case studies from three different urban teacher education programs highlighting different instructional strategies for teaching critical reflection.

### Probing Questions

**Context and participants.** Randy taught and supervised graduate students in a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Randy was in his fourth year at the college after a thirty-year career as a secondary English teacher, professional development facilitator, teacher-leader, and assistant high school principal.

The student participants in this case study included 37 MAT candidates between the ages of 22-48. There were

11 career changers and 26 who came straight from an undergraduate institution. The participants were all secondary teacher candidates from two different cohorts of the MAT program. The program was comprised of a summer semester that included foundational coursework, a fall semester that included both coursework and field experiences, and a spring semester that included student teaching and a seminar course. After receiving licensure in the spring, the participants completed one final course electronically during their first semester of teaching. The program used a social networking application called *Moodle* for the online course.

The participants were placed in a variety of nearby schools. Nearly a third of the students were placed in secondary schools of about 1,700 students with high poverty (over 60% free and reduced lunch) and some diversity (approximately 25% minority). The other two thirds of the participants were placed in smaller rural schools with little diversity (over 94% Caucasian), but significant poverty (ranging from 30% to 48% free and reduced lunch).

Randy and a co-teaching partner delivered both the coursework and the supervision for the annual cohort of students. During the entire school year, they observed and met with the student teachers on a regular basis, each doing a minimum of 15 formal observations with each student during the school year. Mentor teachers also did many formal and informal observations. The program used a coaching model which required both the supervisors and the mentor teachers to give frequent focused feedback to the student teachers in both fall and spring semesters.

**Teaching methods.** For the purposes of this study, Randy focused on the instructional strategy of *asking probing questions* as a developmental step toward ongoing critical reflection. Asking probing questions is important because meaningful questions help new teachers uncover assumptions that can hinder reflective practice (Brookfield, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). Constant questioning (Nieto, 1999) and the development of an inner dialogue (Palmer, 1998) enable pre-

service teachers to recognize the importance of creating knowledge about teaching rather than merely receiving it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

At the outset of the program, Randy explicitly modeled his own use of probing questions as part of reflection about professional readings to help his students learn to challenge assumptions when they read professionally. Some of those questions encouraged students to challenge assumptions about power structures in schools and classrooms (Cranton, 2006; Nieto, 1999). Working with the same cohort during the second semester, Randy taught them to pose questions about what they saw in their field experiences, their course readings, and the connections between the readings and what they saw in schools. This was done both individually and in collaborative groups. In the third semester, the MAT candidates transitioned into full-time student teaching, and they used the standards of the program to generate probing questions about teaching and learning in their classroom. Finally, the MAT students participated in an online course to complete their master’s degree. In this virtual context, they posted responses electronically and Randy monitored their ability to apply reflective questioning to their practice in their first semester of teaching. The online context supported both personal and collaborative reflections.

**Data collection, and analysis.** To determine how the instruction fostered on-going reflection on the part of the new teachers, Randy analyzed documents from 37 graduates of two different cohorts using a coding process based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). He read capstone essays that candidates wrote as the final assignment at the culmination of the three semester program. He also read electronic responses posted to *Moodle* during the final online course.

Randy undertook data analysis as a recursive cycle (Creswell, 2006) including organizing the data, reviewing all data to get a sense of what it meant as a whole, writing notes and questions, identifying categories or themes, and integrating/summarizing the data

(Creswell, 2006). He read all capstone essays for Cohort 6 and all *Moodle* responses for Cohort 5. He analyzed essays and responses for any patterns or themes that supported or refuted the premise that this program was developing the reflective capacities of teaching candidates (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). Data were coded in order to help identify themes which included the developmental nature of reflection, the role of dilemmas or disorienting events, the complex nature of reflection including challenging of assumptions or generation of new questions, and the social construction of identity. After analyzing capstone essays and *Moodle* responses, time was allotted for stepping back to consider the questions: What is the overall data telling me at this point? What is it that I do not know yet? (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

**Findings.** An analysis of the capstone essays suggested that MAT candidates had internalized a capacity to reflect in ways that were instrumental to their ongoing professional growth. A majority of the MAT candidates indicated that their personal growth was intertwined with their professional growth. Over 80% of them used phrases such as “continuing to improve,” “never arriving,” “continually growing,” or “always developing” to describe their understanding that their personal growth was integral to their lives as teachers. The same high percentage of MAT candidates also used various ways to describe the importance of posing questions to help them reflect on their teaching. The following excerpt was typical of nearly all the capstone essays in its emphasis on reflection that connected their identity to their professional life.

...becoming a successful teacher is a journey and a process. It is a discovery of self, where we are constantly questioning our actions, thoughts, and words...I have made a lifelong commitment of developing a teacher identity that will directly affect my students' lives... This means that ultimately, my goal as a teacher is to develop and nurture my character. I must remind myself that my character will

develop through my experiences.

Over 70% of the capstone essays included references to reflection that took into account not only a teacher's inner life but also an awareness of the importance of anchoring reflection in their students and their colleagues.

What began as an inner longing to be a better teacher led me to look outward for answers. I have learned that the answers to my questions are within me. They can't be explained, clearly and simply to me in a few hours...The answers are hidden, bit by bit, in each class I teach. They are in my experiences with my students, my colleagues, and with my own inner teacher. They are in my ability and willingness to reflect on myself as a teacher and my own performance in the classroom. The information exists with my colleagues in their hundreds of collective years of craft knowledge. The answers I seek are in my students, if I will only humble myself enough to ask them.

More than 70% of the MAT candidates also showed that they had internalized the process of continuing to pose questions as they engaged in inquiry. Some of their reflections about questioning were directly related to content-specific instruction while other reflections were more general such as the following:

Nieto (1999) states, “All good teaching is about transformation.” I believe that is true in my continued educational journey. I will continually question my effectiveness as a teacher: Am I meeting the needs of my students? Is there more I need to do to ensure academic success? How are my students learning? How do I know? Striving to answer these constant questions will require me to stay educated on best practices, consistently share craft knowledge with colleagues, and never forget I have much to learn from my students. My students are and will continue to be my greatest tool in “awakening the teacher within”...

Teaching is a continual journey.

During the final course that MAT graduates took during their first year of teaching, they continued to reflect on how course readings and experiences from the preceding year impacted who they were and how they were applying what they believed to their practice. While all MAT graduates reflected on how they were applying ideas from their program to their practice, a number of them involved their students in their reflection as well.

The wheels fell off completely in second period on Friday. They went from social to insane...I've been going over things in my mind...What could I have done differently? They were doing group work, maybe I should have moved some groups farther away from each other, or moved one group into the hallway so that there were fewer distractions. Or maybe the fact that several of them are failing has taken their attitude from apathetic to hateful.

Fortunately one student started to freak out about what they needed to finish for the day and asked, “How are we supposed to do this on Monday?” It just happened to be at one of those moments when everyone had stopped talking for a few seconds.

I said, “Well, let's talk about that.” And we did. They had five minutes left to decide what chapter they would read, read it, select an important scene and decide how their group would act it out on Monday. Some groups were further along than others, but it obviously wasn't going to happen before the bell. I asked them how they found themselves in this mess and what they expected from me at this point. We ended up negotiating a 30 minute window on Monday for them to finish preparing for their scenes. So, in a way, it worked out better than I could have hoped, because they reached such a crisis point that I finally had their attention and we could talk about what happened

before they disappeared to the hallways.

The previous example shows how the new teacher had internalized the sense that reflection was not only ongoing, but should sometimes be done with students. Involving students as part of reflection was not described as something extraordinary. On the contrary, the description seemed to imply that strong relationships with students had already been developed allowing for such collaborative reflection to take place without preparation, without outside support, and without extensive preparation on the part of the first year teacher.

Randy's results suggest that his MAT students internalized a capacity to reflect on their practice and, indeed, to begin to see reflection as something they do with their students--not merely about their students. The sense of ongoing questioning and challenging of assumptions that he tried to embed throughout his instruction seemed to be manifested in both the capstone essays and the online responses during their first semester of teaching. The data did not show, however, that his students had engaged in critical reflection, challenging assumptions about political, social, or economic conditions.

## PROTOCOLS

**Context and participants.** Sue, in her sixteenth year as a teacher educator, conducted this case study at a large urban university in the Midwest in a *Transition to Teaching* program for graduate students. Before coming to teacher education, she taught high school journalism and English as well as college writing classes. She also worked as a school-change coach for the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Sue followed the development of critical reflection in a participant group of 24 graduate students, all transitioning from other professions. These students were studying to become secondary teachers in social studies, mathematics, English, Spanish, biology, and chemistry. Sue was their instructor for a 15-week general *High School Methods* course during the

third semester of the program. The students began this 18-credit *Transition to Teaching* program by taking one summer course. They took two courses in the fall and spring and finished the following summer with a final capstone seminar. They were placed in middle school classrooms as partners during the fall semester and as student teachers in high schools in the spring. While they were taking Sue's class, they were placed as student teachers in two different high schools in the local large urban school district where they experienced the impact of poverty on student learning (84% free and reduced lunch and 1,300 homeless students in the system) and the challenge of diversity (12% ESL students, 66% minority students, and 20% students labeled as special education).

**Teaching Methods.** In previous work as a school coach, Sue had great success using protocols with groups of teachers, and she believed that step-by-step guidelines for doing collaborative analysis would help her students learn critical reflection (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007). Sue introduced several protocols from a set compiled by the National School Reform Faculty (<http://www.nsrffarmony.org>), but specifically focused on a protocol called *The Consultancy*, because the students reported it was the most helpful protocol to them.

*The Consultancy* has several steps: first is writing about a dilemma faced in the classroom by describing it and posing an authentic question about it; second is bringing the written dilemma and question to a small collaborative group for discussion; during this part of the process, the writer answers clarifying questions and then listens while the rest of the group discusses the dilemma and the question; finally, the writer of the dilemma either responds orally to the group or in writing regarding the conversation and questions raised by the dilemma. The goal is to deepen understanding of nuances about the dilemma by bringing assumptions and additional questions to the forefront of discussion.

## Data collection and analysis.

Students wrote their dilemmas ahead of class, presented them to a small group for questions, and then reflected on both their dilemma and *the consultancy* process. Students wrote three separate entries and post-conversation reflections over the course of class meetings. Each then completed a final reflection on the use of the protocols by the end of the semester. These writings comprised the data set for analysis.

This data set was analyzed using elements from grounded theory (Glazer and Strauss, 1967) and content analysis (Stemler, 2001). Sue used an emergent design for coding, identifying key phrases and words used by each student. She conducted a content analysis of each student's writing, coding language that suggested how well *The Consultancy* worked for each student, as represented by their phrasing. While not doing a word frequency count, she did search for phrasing that defined the usefulness of the protocol for each student. After this initial analysis, Sue began a second reading of the reflections, creating categories to fit with what the students' comments suggested. In a third reading, she coded each of the students' summative comments that described their perceptions of the effectiveness of *The Consultancy* protocol.

**Findings.** Sue's analysis showed *The Consultancy* protocol worked well for about a third of the 24 *Transition to Teaching* students. This small group of students grasped that the purpose of the protocol was to complicate their dilemmas, to seek better understanding of their problems by thinking from different viewpoints before formulating solutions. The other two-thirds of the students went through the protocol process with their focus on solving their problems. They failed to appreciate the value of the protocol for deepening critical reflection.

The students wrote about a variety of dilemmas. Six students chose dilemmas related to student disruptions and misbehaviors. For example, they expressed concerns over how to reduce conflict with students, how to get them to be more engaged, how to redirect them – not surprising, given that all of the students were concerned about

taking over their high school classrooms as student teachers within a few weeks. Eleven students focused on curricular or instructional issues related to resources, including students more actively in their learning, giving homework, getting students in Spanish to speak more often in Spanish, and developing inquiry-based lessons for science.

Students who valued the protocol indicated the process helped them to suspend judgment. They felt the probing questions asked by their peers helped them think more deeply and from different viewpoints during the process. They acknowledged that verbalizing and writing about the dilemmas helped them clarify the questions and concerns underlying the dilemmas.

One student observed:

I found it most difficult during our groups in seminar not to try to solve the dilemmas people were having outright or even offer suggestions immediately. I do see that by avoiding this, we were forced to spend more time contemplating the circumstances of our situations and possible explanations aside from our initial judgments. Clarifying questions obviously helped each of us provide/gain more details about situations to form better probing questions. We did catch a few questions that were solutions in disguise, and many times were able to clarify when, where, how, and who answers.

Another student wrote:

Not having a concrete answer to potential probing questions indicates to me that more thoughtful insight is necessary to develop a broader understanding of my dilemma. On the other hand, producing clarifying and probing questions for my peers helps me better understand this process of thinking. By being actively involved with my group members' dilemmas, I will develop a more routine manner of thinking that, hopefully, will lead to deeper understandings. . .It is difficult not to give out recommendations. . .It is in our nature to

find a quick solution to problems and not spend a great deal of time pondering alternative outcomes.

The students who valued the protocol process gained insights into their learning, like this student teaching in a project-based New Tech High classroom:

Besides clarifying questions, a number of thought-provoking probing questions were asked. One question was, "How are students being guided through this process [inquiry in science class]?" This question made me realize how little guidance or facilitation actually occurs. While teachers do make sure students read the entry document to the project, there is never a real discussion in the class that would invite student questions. This question has made me ask myself, "What does it mean to facilitate or guide learning?" I know the short answer is "coach the students along." But what does it literally mean? What does this physically look like in the classroom? Is what my mentor is doing now *facilitation*? Does facilitation mean that direct teacher instruction is minimized, all activities are voluntary, rules are abolished, and other forms of instructional experience (besides the computer) are removed?...In summary, I do not think that facilitation means teachers are passive and wait for students to come to them with questions or seeking help. Sometimes being a good teacher means using structure and scaffolding so that students can work independently.

Students who did not value the protocol saw little need for multiple perspectives when reflecting on dilemmas. The "utility" factor was strong. Like this student, they wanted pragmatic solutions:

Well, I hate to say I told me so, but... the probing questions that were supposed to broaden my perspective were about as useful as lecturing my cats as to why they shouldn't fight...[The discussion and questions] still don't drive to the heart

of my dilemma--how can I actually steal enough time from the demands of the curriculum schedule to create a rigorous and interesting unit that still covers all of the material that must be covered in order to meet the demands of the final exam?

Other students were frustrated by the structure of the protocol and Sue's insistence that they follow it exactly; being forced to use a specific interactive structure was unfamiliar. Students, like this one, felt the rigidity of the protocol interrupted the normal flow of interaction:

I understand the purpose of this exercise, to develop the skills to examine an issue from multiple perspectives and create a reflective analysis regarding issues...The rigidity of the protocol actually prevents the appropriate give-and-take that I find so valuable in examining an issue. I'm fairly certain that none of the dilemma presenters found any major question that broke open a perspective they hadn't had previously.

The students' mixed responses to the use of *The Consultancy* protocol suggest that it was a challenging cognitive task for the preservice teachers. Because it is a collaborative learning process, the protocol's potential went unrealized when students did not go deep enough in examining assumptions, asking probing and clarifying questions, or suspending the rush to a solution.

## DILEMAS

### Context and participants.

Beth's case study was conducted at the same Midwestern urban university as Case Two, where she has been a faculty member for fifteen years. Beth studied the students' development of critical reflection in the undergraduate program called *Learning to Teach/Teaching to Learn*. Prior to her work at the university, she was an elementary teacher and literacy consultant for the state Department of Education.

The participants were 51 undergraduate students ranging from the ages of 20 to 45 who were in their

third-semester of a four semester program (60 credit hours) to prepare them as urban elementary teachers. In this program, students worked in cohorts of about 25-30 students that were each hosted by partnership schools in the city. The students had class two days a week on campus the first two semesters of the program and spent a half-day doing field work in mentor teachers' classrooms. During the third and fourth semesters, students met for classes in the schools, observing classrooms leading up to student teaching. During these last two semesters of the program, the students were in class two days a week for six weeks, completing two intensive courses. Afterwards they worked as student teachers every day for eight weeks. At the end of the semester, they reconnected with their peers and college instructors to review and reflect on their experiences.

Beth taught a literacy methods class to these third-semester students while a co-instructor taught special education methods. She also worked with a school coach who supported students during student teaching. The students were all placed in the local urban school district or the adjacent districts with very similar demographics as those detailed in Case Two. For more than half the urban university students, these schools differed significantly from the rural or suburban schools the students attended themselves.

**Teaching methods.** Beth focused on the use of dilemmas to develop students' capacity to do critical reflection. Dilemmas, or "disorienting events," are thought-provoking critical incidents that leave students uncertain about what they have experienced or how they should respond. Research on adult learning (Mezirow, 2000) has shown that adults are most apt to learn something new when they have an experience that pushes them out of their comfort zone. Teachers who wrestle with understanding dilemmas are more likely to make changes in their practices (Brookfield, 2006). The key to critical reflection on dilemmas is the possession of a set of lenses that can expose the role power and privilege play

in social and cultural interactions in the classroom and raise questions of equity and fairness in schools (Cranton, 2006).

Beth asked the students to complete a written reflection about a critical incident, or dilemma in their teaching practice. This assignment was given to students at the end of the semester as they finished their first eight weeks of student teaching in an urban classroom. The students were asked to identify one critical incident or school practice that troubled them. Students described the incident or practice and their emotional response to it. Students were then asked to deconstruct, to look again, with various critical lenses including looking for their own biases and assumptions rooted in their own experiences and cultural background. Similarly, students were encouraged to look from the perspectives of authors and constructs discussed in class, including discourses of power and privilege, inclusion and deficit views of learners, gender, and socio-economic status. Finally, the students were asked to generate other possible ways the dilemmas might have been resolved, as well as some guiding principles for themselves.

#### **Data collection and analysis.**

The data set for analysis consisted of 51 critical reflection assignments from two different cohorts of students, ranging from 8-15 pages in length. Beth coded these reflections by looking at the nature of the critical incidences, the success of the students in recognizing their own biases and assumptions, and their connections to critical perspectives read and discussed as part of the class and program (Creswell, 2006). As she did the coding, Beth also jotted observations and interesting juxtapositions and noted changes in students' ability to do critical reflection. As themes emerged, Beth went back to the reflections to pull together student comments related to the themes for coding, providing a multilayered view of how these themes played out in the data.

**Findings.** The analysis of these critical reflections was focused on understanding what the students explored as critical incidences or dilemmas and

the evidence of transformation in the students' thinking. Were they able to use the multiple critical lenses introduced in their coursework to see their teaching situations from varied and enlightening perspectives? Did the critical reflection assignment enable them to arrive at informed guiding principles for their future teaching experiences?

About three-fourths (n=38) of the "critical incidences" were stories of children with issues that disrupted their learning. Some of these stories were about resistant learners who let everyone know, often quite loudly, that the lessons "sucked" or that the preservice teachers were "racists". Another teacher told about the day her kindergarten student went to visit his sister in third grade instead of getting on the bus; another had to deal with a boy who stole her laptop computer. Several told stories about children with special learning needs, unmet physical and emotional needs, or serious problems at home. All of these stories explored the ways that the particular school context either worked in support of the children and the student teachers or not. In most cases, the interns did not find the level of support they felt was necessary and this led to final statements about the need for urban teachers to exhibit agency in school contexts.

The remaining one-fourth of the critical incidences were written about teachers who were seen as harsh or unsupportive in their dealings with particular children. The interns saw teachers isolate or ignore certain children or punish children for things beyond their control. One intern wrote about the teacher's slowness to involve the parents of a child who needed more support and marveled at the change that took place once the parents were included in the situation; another critical incidence story was about the use/misuse of time during the school day.

Overall, these critical reflection assignments enabled interns to see the value of looking for their own biases and assumptions. One student wrote:

Looking back, I do not feel that my assumptions were valid. I would describe them as being more of

stereotypes...Writing reflections has made me aware of the assumptions and biases one makes. It is easy to do, but as a future educator I need to take a step back and not judge. I need to evaluate the situation in more depth by looking at it from multiple perspectives.

Students also saw that their first assessments of the learners under their tutelage needed to be more thoughtful. They showed that they were learning to make adjustments based on individual learners.

The assumption that this student was frustrated and incapable of completing the assignment was completely wrong. It was clearly an instructional design error. The directions were not written clearly enough for the student to understand...Although these instructions were clear enough for other students, they were not clear for this student...Once I explained the assignment in a different way, he was able to complete it rather quickly. This also has to do with the differences in children. Not every child is going to understand one thing in the same way.

The critical reflection assignment asked the interns to generate at least one principle that would guide their teaching going forward from their first student teaching experience. These principles ranged in nature from having patience with difficult children to holding themselves to professional standards. Over half of these principles emphasized the importance of communication and community. For example, one student wrote:

The guiding principle I have brought from the situation is I need to recognize, validate, and discuss each student's feelings and reactions in order for myself and the student to reach a better understanding and resolution. The challenging part will be to make it clear I am listening, and trying to understand.

Another student reflected:

One guiding principle for me is forgiveness. I forgave [my student] for taking my computer and remembered that he was just a little boy...I also forgave myself. I'd assumed that because [my student] and I shared ethnicity that his family taught him the same things my family taught me...but the child made a mistake indicating a need for help and intervention from the adults around him. I learned the importance of not hesitating to intervene on a child's behalf.

The *Critical Reflection* assignment included a series of questions that scaffolded the critical reflection of the students and the evidence showed that many were engaged in learning with and from the children in their care. But the assignments also revealed how far the students had to go to unseat their own biases and assumptions, begging the question of whether the assignment really impacted their embedded beliefs. Because there was no sharing of the reflections or any dialoguing with others in the schools or in their cohorts, it seems as if the assignment may well have been just one more task to check off their list.

## DISCUSSION

This collaborative inquiry provides a data-driven view of methods used to teach critical reflection in three different urban teacher education programs. Although the three cases are not necessarily parallel in terms of data collection and analysis, from our perspective, this is not a shortcoming, but rather an expected outcome of collaborative inquiry. These cases represent the pursuit of personal questions tackled according to personal intentions. They are not comparative in the sense that they lead to a singular conclusion about instructional strategies for teaching critical reflection. Rather they provide multiple perspectives that originate from the close study of three instructional strategies implemented in programs which differed in many ways, including the students involved, the public school contexts,

and the structure of the programs.

Keeping in mind the differences in the case studies and the idea that any story we tell based on these case studies is a partial one, we do see evidence that the instructional strategies used to teach critical reflection in each case favorably impacted student learning. In Case Three, the critical reflection assignment enabled all but one student to successfully focus on a dilemma that made fertile ground for examining their own cultural backgrounds, biases, and assumptions. The students used the questions in the assignment to guide their deconstruction of a troubling situation, examining it through lenses such as discourses of power and privilege, inclusion, gender differences, language background, social status, and school climate. These students also grew in terms of their own agency as urban teachers by generating their own guiding principle for their teaching in the future. They moved from being unconscious to conscious about the dysfunction of many status quo practices in urban elementary schools.

In Case Two, Sue's students embraced the collaborative nature of the protocol discussions easily. They valued learning from each other and grew in their commitment to one another as members of a cohort group. However, only about a third of the students reached more complex questioning and discussion. The students struggled with the idea of asking enough probing questions to complicate teaching dilemmas. They were more comfortable offering solutions, and the structured protocol process of taking deliberate steps as a group to better understand the problems seemed inefficient to some.

The MAT students in Case One left their program with a strong sense of the importance of reflection as an integral part of teaching and their development as professionals. They valued asking questions as part of the ongoing process of staying focused on students and their learning. They were collaborative even to the point of including the students in their reflective processes. But their reflections did not have a strong critical edge to them. In Randy's findings, we did not see a strong focus on critical perspec-

tives that interrupted the status quo.

These varied results provided us with insights and questions. Beth realized that her critical reflection assignment for the undergraduates lacked any collaborative component and failed to teach reflection as a social process. She now has her students participating in a protocol with their critical reflection assignments during the last week of the semester and she has added readings and discussions of “whiteness” and institutionalized racism (Howard, 2006) into the class curriculum. Sue decided that she needed to do more to help students develop as critical reflectors. She is now having students do more background reading to develop their critical lenses and asking students to practice suspending judgment and examine issues from multiple perspectives before attempting protocols. Randy has been giving thought to how to make collaborative inquiry a more recognizable part of his program and how to get students to go deeper in challenging assumptions. He has added different diversity readings and activities to help his graduate students examine and challenge power structures. He has also changed their summer practicum experience to include two weeks working in urban middle schools where they can test out assumptions about race and poverty specifically.

When we first reviewed the findings, we were impressed with Randy’s student responses. His findings showed that his students had taken on identities as reflective practitioners and valued collaborative inquiry. Since this was a goal we all shared for our students, it was gratifying to see these outcomes. As we gave this more thought, we also realized that his MAT program at a small college operated in a significantly different way than the two teacher education programs at the large university. He taught and supervised the same students for four semesters and his data set included reflections from the end of the program, rather than one class assignment like Cases Two and Three. Neither Sue nor Beth could say whether students achieved this threshold of development at the end of their programs. It would be interesting to conduct a follow-up inquiry to find

out more about the development of students at the end of these two programs.

We also realized that it was not easy to see a direct relationship between Randy’s focus on probing questions and the development of his students, because there were many other strategies at work in the program. In large part, Randy’s students seemed to benefit most from doing iterations of collaborative knowledge work guided by his model of collaborative inquiry. In contrast, Case Two focused more specifically on the protocol and provided a view of uneven development, and Case Three showed that the critical reflection assignment engaged students at one point in time, but neither of these two cases provided clear views of what this meant in terms of students’ overall development as critical reflectors. We were left asking, what does it mean when students lag in this area part-way through a program? What about the students who do not willingly engage in critical reflection? What about the students who are not yet intellectually ready to think in such complex ways? Are students just saying what they know we want to hear? What would count as viable measures of the capacity to reflect critically? Can we expect all preservice teachers to become critical reflectors?

## IMPLICATIONS

This study is pushing us as urban educators to work toward a better definition of what it means to do critical reflection. The three of us have deep-seated understanding and capacity to prepare reflective practitioners, but we have much to learn about how to prepare *critical* reflective practitioners. Our own internalized models for teaching and professional development may not reflect the complexity of multiple critical perspectives or critiques of the status quo. We suspect we are not alone in needing better and more explicit frameworks for creating learning communities with the agency to get beyond the barriers to equitable education.

Based on this shared inquiry, we can recommend three strong supports to the development of critical reflection—working with dilemmas, following structured discussion protocols,

and practicing collaborative inquiry. All three of these learning engagements require the use of probing questions. Dilemmas are useful because they can lead new teachers to seek understanding before they impose solutions. These troubling experiences are useful in getting students to see the complexity in urban school experiences by holding up multiple critical lenses. Seeing more of the systems of oppression at work can enable new teachers to recognize that the failure of learners to thrive is not a personal shortcoming of the student and his or her family, but attributable to a set of beliefs and practices that can be changed with enough push back or side-stepped with enough ingenuity.

Structured protocols put more heads at the table and help students to experience group deliberations aimed at better understanding and generating alternatives that are not obvious. They are not common experiences prior to teacher education and students need background in taking multiple perspectives and asking probing questions to make them work. But when they work, they strengthen the power of a community to interrupt the status quo. They also add a measure of rigor and discipline to the collaborative work.

We see collaborative inquiry as a deliberate process of going between personal knowledge and dialogue with peers. It is context-based, making it relevant and authentic. It spirals, with each iteration laying the groundwork for the next. In the professional development realm, we see collaborative inquiry as the basis for practices like Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006) or Inquiry for Equity (Malarkey, 2005) groups. Urban schools need more of this commitment to creating local solutions, and immersing preservice teachers in the process is good preparation. As Sue summed it up, “You can’t be critically reflective absent a collaborative model.”

## CONCLUSION

This collaborative inquiry into critical reflection is a humble beginning, but it has been a productive cycle. We understand our teaching, our students’ learning, and the challenges of critical

reflection better. We hope our cases are illuminating to other teacher educators struggling with these same issues, even though we know they tell a partial story. It is clear to us that critical reflection is a step beyond reflective practice. Being critical is a stance that involves internalized habits of seeing the complexity of urban schools, seeing one's own assumptions and identity, and seeing the need for collaborative knowledge making practice that interrupts the dysfunctional and generates uncommon solutions. Equipped with this stance, new urban teachers are less likely to be co-opted by the status quo and more likely to see ways they can make a difference in the lives of the students they teach.

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