
Urban Legend in Teacher Education

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Many European American pre-service special education teachers participate in activities and coursework to prepare them to engage with diverse students in urban settings. This qualitative study explores the experience of two teacher candidates taking part in one such program. Specifically, the interactions and perceptions of the participants' first urban teaching experience are examined. Interviews and observations were conducted to reflect on the way participants interpret and implement their special education and multicultural education preparation as a means to better understand how to prepare teacher candidates for border crossing (Giroux, 1992) and urban teaching experiences. The need for addressing preconceived notions and expectations about urban education within teacher preparation is discussed.

The United States has experienced a growth in ethnic and cultural diversity for quite some time (Howard, 1999; Murrell, 2001; Schroth et. al., 2001). This growth in diversity has caused significant changes in public education. School corporations and administrators seek more support and resources to better serve their changing communities (Fowler, 2004). Teachers request more professional development to address the special needs of these students and parents look for ways to better connect to schools that will prepare their children for a better future (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Wang et. al., 2004). At the university level, teacher education institutions address these challenges by trying to prepare their mostly European American middle class students to teach in these changing communities (Artiles et. al, 2000). Programs such the *Diversity and Learning Block* offered as part of the teacher preparation at Indiana University-Indianapolis (Morrone, et. al, 2002) and the *Chicago Experience* offered at the University of Iowa (Wade & Raba, 2003) seek to help European American students think critically about difference, diversity, and students with special needs.

The majority of teachers currently teaching are of a “different race, ethnicity, class, gender, and linguistic dominance from that of their students” (Gay, 2003). Special education teachers are specifically challenged by a variety of racial and ethnic issues as they enter their classrooms (Artiles et. al, 2000). In an age plagued with the overrepresentation of students of color placed in special education programs, it is important that preparation programs within the field of special education devote attention to notions of deficit thinking. According to Ford (2003), deficit thinking exists when teachers hold negative, stereotypical, counterproductive views about diverse students

that change their interactions and expectations of these students. The information on deficit thinking pushes educators to think more deeply about what they expect from students and why (Valencia, 1997). In order to prepare pre-service special education teachers for their teaching experience, border crossing experiences may play an extremely valuable role in their preparation.

Some scholars have addressed the benefits of cross community experiences for pre-service teachers (Bennett & Jay, 1997; Cooper, Beare, & Thorman, 1990). This body of literature utilizes the term “border crossing” to identify a teaching experience that takes place in an environment unfamiliar to the teacher. Researchers examining such experiences have discussed their effectiveness in creating culturally competent European American teachers (Wade & Raba, 2003). Transformations emerging from this type of questioning and reflecting, including self-awareness and cultural empathy, were just a few of the documented manifestations of this type of experience (Bennett & Jay, 1997; Cooper, Beare, & Thorman, 1990). These types of cultural renovations in teacher preparation did not come without caveats. Giroux (1992) notes that there may be unforeseeable limits to such experiences and Murtadha-Watts (1998) also discusses the inability to “project that these initial cultural border crossings will represent full transformations for the students” (p.63).

The challenges that pre-service special education teachers encounter in a border crossing experience are the focus of this study. This project seeks to explore how two European American middle class females implement and interpret their teacher preparation, as well as formulate their understanding of teaching special education in an urban setting. The information gained from the first interactions of the participants with urban schools and students of color with special needs has implications to inform those preparing teacher candidates for teaching in urban settings. Specifically, this work also seeks to provide insights on how to better prepare pre-service special education teachers for an urban teaching experience and engage with students diverse from themselves.

Methods

An emergent qualitative design was utilized to address the research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; & McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). It was the intent of this project to have conversations that led to a better understanding of the degree to which teacher preparation impacted a border crossing experience. Given the complex nature of the issues addressed in the research questions, a case study format provides the most promise to allow for better understanding, as well as greater opportunity to connect the experience of

the participants to theory (Stake, 2000). A small sample was randomly selected from a large cohort to allow for more in-depth interviews and observations. In order to capture the complexity of information available and gain insight, multiple data collection was used to safeguard the representation of disparate views and broaden the context. By analyzing various personal portrayals, this research relies on inductive reasoning to document emerging themes.

Participants

Annie and Sarah are two pre-service special education teachers interested in teaching in an urban school community. They are juniors receiving dual licensure in elementary and special education. Both women expressed an interest in eventually teaching in an urban setting and took part in this study as a way to enhance their urban practicum experience.

Annie grew up in a small town about an hour outside of a large metropolis in the Eastern part of the US. She and her younger brother grew up in a middle class European American family. She reports that she always wanted to be a teacher and that a few experiences with kids with special needs influenced her decision to pursue a degree in special education. She is curious about cultural issues and discovering whether teaching in an urban setting is something she might like to do.

Sarah grew up in a small town in the Midwest. She and her brothers grew up in a middle class European American family. She began college as a physical education major, then switched to secondary education. Her interactions with a family member with a disability led her to pursue a degree in special education. Sarah is concerned with making a difference in the lives of children. She is also interested in possibly living in an urban setting after she graduates.

Program

The participants in this study were enrolled in a program for undergraduates that prepare them to work with a wide range of students. The university, in which the program is located, is nestled in a midsized town located in the Midwest. The program allows its students to attain a state license in elementary and special education. Upon entering the program, students are put into cohorts during their sophomore year. During the spring semester of this first year in the program, students engage in two special education courses while finishing up basic requirements. The fall semester of their junior year focuses on curriculum and instruction. This semester includes elementary content area courses, a special education course, and a field experience component in math and science.

The focal point of the spring semester of their junior year is assessment. Students take two courses in assessment, one course in special education, two content area courses, and have a special education practicum within an urban setting (i.e. border crossing). To fulfill their border crossing requirement, the entire cohort is transported as a group an hour north to a nearby metropolis one day a week over the course of a semester. The fall semester of the senior year encourages students to examine their roles as teachers. This final semester of coursework for the program includes three special education courses, a course on culture, a course on research, and a final field experience. Once students complete their course work, they spend their spring semester during their senior year student teaching. Half of their student teaching takes place in an elementary school and the other half takes place in a variety of settings with a special education focus.

Procedures

The researcher and both participants were European American with middle class origins. Additionally, the researcher had previously taught in an urban setting prior to beginning post graduate work. Initial interviews ranged from forty five minutes to over an hour in length, and were conducted face-to-face using a discussion format in order to create the opportunity to explore meanings (see Appendix A). Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety. Interview transcriptions were returned to the interviewees to be checked for accuracy and to seek additional response. Once initial interviews were completed, a field observation was conducted. Participants were observed during their first entire day student teaching in a large Midwestern urban public school district. At the end of the first day, a small focus group was held with both participants. This final interview lasted for an hour and was also transcribed and member checked utilizing the same procedures as the initial interview (see Appendix B). After collecting data from the initial interview, observational field notes, and final interview; emerging themes were selected from the data and coded according to prevalence and frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; & McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; see also, McIntyre, 1997).

Results

Analysis of the data gathered over the course of interviews and field observations uncovered three emerging themes. Throughout the experience, both Annie and Sarah seemed to be exploring their preconceived notions of urban schools while formulating an understanding of teaching special education in an urban setting. Each of the themes provides a glimpse into the connections Annie and Sarah are

making between their teacher preparation and their professional development.

“I want to be PC.”

In the initial interview, Annie and Sarah both described their experience with people of different races and ethnicities. These data are utilized to establish the foundation from which the women are building their perceptions of race and ethnic diversity for their border crossing experience.

Annie: I want to be PC. Do you think they like to be called black or African American? I don't hear them calling themselves African American. There weren't very many people of color in my high school. I don't have many relationships with them, but in high school I went to prom with a group of people and one of the guys was black, but he wasn't really part of the black culture. His friends were all white and he acted white.

Sarah: I don't have a lot of friends from different races. Like in high school we only had 3 or 4 African Americans and no Mexicans or anything.

Prior experiences left both Annie and Sarah with certain racial expectations of the students they would encounter in the urban school. Unfortunately, even after taking course work in multicultural education, both women still struggle with deficit views of the urban setting prior to the border crossing.

Annie: I am worried about one stereotype I think I hold. I am expecting all the students will be black and the majority will be poor. I don't know why, but that's what I think.

Sarah: We went to an urban school for one day. I was unaware how many black students went to the school. The school was run down and stuff but people were still able to teach and stuff.

Both women were placed in a newly renovated urban elementary school. The school had recently received awards of excellence from their district and the state for improvements in student achievement. In discussions after their initial border crossing, both women discussed the impact this initial border crossing experience had on their definition of diversity.

Annie: I thought I saw a lot less black kids than I had expected. I saw a lot more Hispanic kids and that's a minority I've been exposed to a lot less..... I don't know that my idea of diversity has changed though.

Sarah: I don't think my opinion has really changed. I saw a lot of African American kids and I thought that was expected. Diversity isn't just race and color though.

“I saw some kids show their frustration.”

In initial interviews, both Annie and Sarah described their experiences and interactions with people with disabilities. These responses are included to depict the conceptions they have developed

about people with disabilities from their previous lived experience and how those conceptions may be informing their pedagogical development.

Annie: I had an experience with a girl with CP but she wasn't mentally affected.

She was normal; she just had a physical disability.

Sarah: I have a cousin who has Downs and another who has ADHD and LD. I'm very supportive and everything. I try to help out.

Throughout the observation both women engaged with students with disabilities. On the first day of their border crossing, both Annie and Sarah identified a student with special needs that they felt a special connection with. Through the course of the day, both women tried to engage with the student on numerous occasions. Neither woman appeared discouraged when the student did not respond to them in a reciprocal way. At the end of the day, both women discussed their interactions with these students.

Annie: He is so turned off to education. After I prompted him like twelve times he would do what he was suppose to be doing. There's something in there, a button that needs to be turned on. I think that's a lot more of the challenge you get with urban. The kids who think learning isn't cool.

Sarah: They (students with special needs) didn't act much different from the other students.... I saw behavior problems more. I saw some kids show their frustration. The two who had been identified were just as bad as the others.

"I just want to help people, fix things, and make a difference."

Prior to the border crossing experience both women were asked to discuss some of the challenges they perceived for urban special education teachers. Both women shared insights about their expectations of what it might be like to be an urban special education teacher and what they thought may be the personal challenges of teaching children with special needs from urban settings.

Annie: I would probably bring their problems home with me. I would have to realize that I couldn't fix everything. I do think being involved with parents and the community would be easier in a city because things are close.

Sarah: A lot of family issues like divorce, maybe gay and lesbian parents. Students may go home and not have food. They may be dealing with poverty and wearing the same clothes to and from school weekly. Being loved, they may go home and their parents may not care about their homework and teaching them right from wrong. Just being a parent and showing love and support.

During the observation, both women interacted with the students and teachers they were placed with in positive ways. Both women engaged with students by talking with them, helping with class work, and playing games during recess. Both Annie and Sarah were attentive to their assigned mentor teachers. They had lunch with their mentor

teachers and often completed tasks around the classroom as requested. In interviews, they described their perceptions of the teachers they saw in the urban setting.

Annie: I think I was expecting (the urban setting to be) a lot worse than it really was. The faculty was really nice, they had a lot of resources around them. The teachers were dressed really professionally. I just thought they'd be dressed down a bit.

Sarah: I saw some burnt out teachers. I don't want to be one of those teachers who knock kids for their behavior. I'm not gonna sit there and talk about them.

During the recruitment phase of this project both Annie and Sarah expressed a desire to participate as a way to enhance their border crossing experience through reflection and dialogue because they wanted to become urban teachers when they graduated. After the initial border crossing, both women were asked how they felt about possibly becoming urban special education teachers.

Annie: I definitely want to go urban. Today confirmed it. I just enjoyed being there and working with the kids. Especially working with the one kid, he was like my little pet for the day.

Sarah: It made me realize I still want to be a teacher and I'm in it for the right reasons...I think those (students with special needs in urban schools) are the kids I'd be more geared toward to help. That's just the kind of person I am. I just want to help people, fix things, and make a difference.

Limitations

It is important to initially note the limitations of this study. This study was designed to provide a snap shot of the initial border crossing experience of two European American middle class women. All interviews took place within a two week period. Initial interviews were a week or two prior to the experience, the observations took place on the first day of the experience, and the final interviews took place directly after the first day of the border crossing. The findings of the study reflect this time span and are not meant to reflect a longitudinal growth process displayed by the women. This research should be examined for relevance in preparing pre-service teachers for their first border crossing experience. Findings should be discussed as a means to build on this initial experience to allow for optimum growth over the duration of a border crossing.

Discussion

This research brings up a variety of questions about the preparation of special education teachers engaging in a border crossing experience. The importance of expectations brought into the experience emerged as a powerful frame of reference for both Annie and Sarah.

Their preconceived notions, not academic course work, were something that they both relied heavily on when preparing for and reflecting on the initial experience. This aspect of their experience should be explored more deeply to inform how teacher preparation programs could effectively utilize the expectations of pre-service special education teachers preparing for their first border crossing experience. The current design of this study did not allow for further exploration of the underlying assumptions and indications of deficit thinking that emerged in the findings. Future research in this area might explicitly examine pre-service special education teachers' preconceptions about diversity and teaching special education in an urban setting.

In addition to their expectations of the experience, the conceptualizations of diversity and teaching special education in an urban setting that the women walked into the experience with are enlightening. In 1997, McIntyre developed the term "White Knights" to describe a detrimental characteristic of some of the European American participants in her study of the role of whiteness in teaching. These participants described feelings of wanting to save students of color from perceived deficits of their lifestyles and environment. Years later, the challenge of "White Knights" still persists. The information obtained in this study exposes a need for additional examination of this area to fully understand any professional transformations that may be taking place for Annie and Sarah. Future research should consider the experience of these women as a place to begin asking deeper research questions about the preparation of pre-service special education teachers as a means to begin to combat the variety of racial and cultural issues currently confronting the field of special education.

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Appendix A

Initial Interview Questions

1. Where are you from? Describe your hometown.
2. Did you travel while you were growing up? (Where?)
3. How do you think your background/upbringing informs your teaching?
4. Do you think you would ever like to live in a big city? (Why or Why not)
5. What are your relationships like with your friends, relatives, classmates, dates, family members that are people of color or have special needs?
6. Why did you want to be a teacher?
7. Why did you want to work in special education?
8. Where are you currently in your education program?
9. How many special ed/multicultural ed courses have you had so far?
10. How many practicum placements have you had so far in your program?
11. What makes you most anxious, nervous, or excited about the placement?
12. Is there anything specific that you have done to prepare you for this placement?
13. Have you read any books on multicultural issues in class or on your own? What did you learn from them?
14. What impact do you think media or news media has on how you think about diversity or urban settings?
15. How do you feel about going to the metropolis?
16. What do you know about urban school settings or (the public school) specifically?
17. What are your expectations of yourself and the students you will meet in the experience?
18. If you were a teacher in an urban setting what do you think some of your challenges may be?

Appendix B

Post Interview Questions

1. How was your first day?
2. What did you see around you?
3. What did you think of the school, teachers, and students?
4. What was something that surprised you?
5. How have your teacher education courses prepared you for this experience?
6. How do you think this experience will inform your growth as a teacher?
7. What are your thoughts about your next visit?
8. What are thoughts on students you encountered?
9. After this experience, what are your thoughts about teaching in an urban setting? Please explain.