

## PRE-SERVICE TEACHER VISION AND URBAN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

As preservice teachers enter their first teaching experience, they often have perceptions about what teaching will be like based on a vision that is typically linked to their own background and experiences. This study explores the changes in visions of 15 preservice teachers throughout student teaching in an urban environment. The research will discuss five categories that emerged in how students experienced a shift in vision and will offer suggestions for teacher educators on how to proactively prepare preservice teachers for urban student teaching placements.

**Keywords:** Urban, student teaching, vision, preservice teachers

Institutions of higher education face the challenge of preparing teachers ready to enter any classroom environment. Teacher preparation programs typically have the responsibility of understanding preservice teachers' varied and often biased views of urban schools. Students are entering these teacher preparation programs with strong beliefs and ideas about what it means to teach in an urban school (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). Student teaching is one of the most formative experiences in a preservice teachers' program in which visions are malleable. Teacher preparation programs can determine what positively shifts and shapes teacher vision while in urban schools to address misconceptions or replicate high-quality experiences more systematically and proactively.

### Context of the Study

Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the country. *The Connecticut Mirror* (2012) reported on scores from the U.S. Department of Education, noting that the achievement gap between low-income Connecticut students and their more affluent peers continues to be the largest in the nation. The gap between black and Hispanic students and their white peers is also one of the largest in the nation.

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Hartford, the state's capitol, is one of the urban school settings that partner with the University of Connecticut. In addition to being an urban area, Hartford experiences a poverty rate of 29.4 percent and is the home to 35,741 individuals living in poverty. Hartford is one of the poorest cities in the United States, being described by Downs (2007) as the "hole in a generously glazed donut." Surrounded by some of the richest and most resourced towns in the state, many people work in Hartford, but do not live in the city. Often, a short 10-minute drive can mean the difference between being in a highly resourced and achieving school district or a grossly underfunded and struggling one. Ranking eighth as one of the most segregated cities in the country (Pastor, 2012), Hartford offers an opportunity to explore issues of access, equity, poverty, privilege and ethnicity while students simultaneously learn how to teach.

As in other areas of the country, the teacher candidates at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut generally continue to be white women from suburban areas (Borrero, 2011). Many have had little, if any, life experience in urban settings. Gay and Howard (2000) reference the relatively homogenous teaching force and the "demographic divide" that continues to be prevalent in American public education. Preparing preservice teachers to educate students in starkly different districts than where they are from are have experienced, presents unique challenges and opportunities (Banks et al., 2005; Gay & Howard, 2000).

### **Neag School of Education Integrated Bachelors/Master's Program (IB/M)**

The five-year integrated bachelors/master's teacher preparation program is organized around five strands of study: core, clinic, seminar, subject specific pedagogy, and a subject area major in liberal arts. Each cohort averages in size from 120 to 140 new teacher candidates who begin in their junior year. The weekly seminar course is designed to bridge the gap sometimes found between theoretical content (core) and practice (clinic). In seminar, students focus on the analysis and reflection of core as it intersects with clinic. This study focuses on the senior student teaching seminar for students placed in Hartford Public Schools.

### **Urban Student Teaching and Vision**

Research indicates "student teaching [is] the most influential component of professional education" (Berry, Montgomery, Snyder & Center for Teaching, 2008). Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) stated that, "as teachers develop identity, context matters—both in the teacher preparation program and in the practicum where candidates experience classrooms firsthand" (p. 90). Urban schools, often described as linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse, may also be undergoing reform or restructuring and facing complex challenges with funding and retaining teachers. The student teaching experience can be a transformative opportunity for preservice teachers to shape or reshape their vision and perceptions of urban schools. Although some studies report that preservice teachers felt less comfortable in an urban placement (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Stairs, 2008), other studies indicate that a preservice teachers with urban an placements was more likely to feel prepared as a highly qualified teacher and as a teacher in an urban school as opposed to students who had placements in suburban settings (Singer, Catapano, & Huisman, 2010). At the close of the urban practicum, new

value and insights emerged for teacher candidates (Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008).

Vision has been mentioned by researchers in relationship to various skills and dispositions necessary for effective teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hammerness, 2006). Types of visions teacher educators have encouraged us to consider in preparing new teachers are curricular, organizational versus personal, and individual versus program. Perhaps the most important type of vision we need to consider in preparing educators is what Hammerness (2006) referred to as a “flexible vision.” Flexible vision can also be considered an adaptability or resilience applied to teaching. Teachers have stated that after completing an urban placement, they were struck by a change in vision, viewed themselves as a teacher, and felt that successful teaching required a level of reciprocal learning between teacher and student (Merseth, Sommer & Dickstein, 2008). While vision has been explored in relation to *inservice* teachers, little has been done to consider the development, shifts, and opportunities that can occur from studying vision in *preservice* teachers. The consideration of preservice teachers’ visions and experiences are important for the development of enhanced theory and pedagogy in urban education (Borrero, 2011; Nuby, 2010).

Hammerness (2006) described the two central struggles related to teacher vision as being a balance between “constantly shifting demands of subject matter and the student’s needs; and dealing with the uneasy tension between their ideal and their current practice” (p. 5). Visions help teachers form what is possible, desirable, and inspired while connecting important values with classroom practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Perhaps this imbalance is the most stark and obvious while learning how to teach while teaching. The student teaching experience is often the first opportunity preservice teachers are able to put into practice with the knowledge and skills they learn during their preparation programs. Even the most conscientious preservice teacher may be faced with cognitive dissonance when theory and practice do not match. Pre-service teachers often complete student teaching in locations that do not reflect the schooling experience they had as children and often form their vision from an image of how they were schooled. Vision, as described by Maxine Greene (1988), is the “consciousness of possibility.” For students placed in vulnerable areas, teachers need to bring the conscience of what is possible to the classroom and make it accessible for their students.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to contribute to general knowledge, enhance understanding, and offer heuristic insight (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) on how urban student teaching experiences have an impact on preservice teacher vision. In this case, the lived experiences of preservice teachers placed in urban clinic settings were studied by using material culture. Rossman and Rallis (2003) refer to the use of material culture as relatively “unobtrusive and potentially rich in portraying the values and beliefs in a setting or social domain” (p. 198).

## **Participants**

The 15 preservice teachers who participated in the study represented all content areas and grade levels. The participants were placed in urban partner schools and were

second-semester seniors enrolled in the five-year IB/M program majoring in education. The student teaching placement took place in the students' fourth semester, resulting in the first full-time teaching experience. Participants were recruited for the study based on their enrollment in a three-credit seminar course in which the researchers were also the instructors. The students completed the journal prompts as reflective assignments for the course and gave consent to participate in the study at the completion of the course. Grades for the course were assigned before permission was requested for participation in the study.

### **Procedure**

Journal prompts were asked iteratively at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. The January prompts asked students to describe their vision of teaching and how or if they anticipate their vision being executed in an urban school. The midterm reflection prompt asked how their vision and an ideal classroom had changed. The final prompt asked students to describe their vision of teaching, an ideal classroom, and how it has been affected by being in an urban school student teaching placement.

Analysis of material culture may be the most interpretive analytic act in qualitative research because no protocols or specific guidelines for such analysis are available (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Data was reviewed several times over several months using categorical analysis to allow for patterns to emerge. Similarities and differences across the whole group were considered. Changes in individuals and their particular experience were also considered.

### **Findings**

In analyzing the data, five categories emerged that described what student teachers experienced while trying to implement their vision of teaching in an urban placement. The first category resulted in no mention or acknowledgment of the urban context in any of the three journal prompts. Only one person did not address the variable of the urban experience. The second category illustrated new realizations in how preservice teachers defined the role of teacher. The third category demonstrated cognitive dissonance in the difference between their ideal vision as it intersected with the reality of what they were experiencing. This category also included either the accommodation of the new information for professional growth *or* led to the fourth category, which was the establishment or reinforcement of negative perceptions. The last category that emerged was an appreciation, acceptance, and openness to the urban context the students had before, during, and after the experience.

### **Discussion**

The following discussion expands upon categories that emerged from the journals. The student who did not mention the urban context will not be included and is considered an outlier. Specific recommendations were added under each category due to their applicability to the findings, although all students could benefit from integrating the suggestions into planning or programming for teacher preparation students.

### **New Realizations in How They Defined the Role of a Teacher**

The urban experience provided an opportunity for three students to reshape their vision by expanding their definition of the role of teacher. All three mentioned a shift from what they perceived to be the focus of teaching, which was to deliver content to more of a social emotional role. One student stated, “As a teacher, I began realizing that the actual profession doesn’t revolve around teaching, but mentor, parent, advocate, friend, confidant” (Personal communication, April 25, 2011). Another student commented on how content became secondary in an urban environment:

In an urban environment, content is not the main focus of teaching. There are so many other aspects and barriers I had to overcome before really focusing on content. I ended up putting much of my time and effort into building strong relationships with all of my students and getting to know them on a personal level. (Personal communication, April 25, 2011)

If teacher educators spend time preparing students for some of the unique challenges before they begin their placements, even if it means delaying a clinical experience, it may diminish the learning curve for the students. Focusing on relevant and practical topics such as culturally responsive pedagogy and knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds (Safford & Bales, 2011), is essential to the long and short-term success of the student or new teacher.

### **Cognitive Dissonance in Ideal Versus Reality**

More than half of the students in the study noted a shift in the way they perceived the urban environment as having an impact on their ability to execute their vision of teaching. In particular, the obstacles teachers face and the resources they felt students and teachers should have had an impact on their visions, but did not necessarily change a vision itself. This is demonstrated when a student reflects that being in an urban student teaching setting has “presented many obstacles such as a lack of resources, large class sizes, piles of paperwork and discipline issues. As a teacher, my vision has remained the same, but how to reach that vision has changed” (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). It seems as though this student has accommodated for the new information and remains committed to look for pathways in continuing to work towards her version of an ideal classroom.

Other students seem to be somewhere on the trajectory of trying to make sense of available or unavailable resources. When mentioning basic resources, one student felt “even simple things such as a classroom with pipes that don’t leak, or with running water and sinks, or with computer access become evident to me now as important in my classroom” (Personal communication, February, 7, 2011). While another student focused more on the professional and collegial resources by stating, “Having an urban placement for student teaching has strengthened my views of how important teamwork, student centered learning, and necessary resources are for a successful classroom” (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). This same student identified that her vision may be difficult to accomplish in an urban environment, but had more specific examples by the end of the semester on what she would need to consider when working in urban contexts.

A suggestion for teacher educators would be to focus on the concept of flexible vision (Hammerness, 2006) as essential to resilience, retention, hope and optimism. Any course the student teacher takes alongside the clinical experience should manage and buffer them against adversity as well as build upon knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for success in working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Coursework should intentionally focus on how to maintain high expectations for themselves and their students when resources are scarce.

### **Establishment or Reinforcement of Negative Perceptions**

Several students who had a vision of teaching met by challenging conditions seemed to be grappling with lack of information. One student stated his confusion and uncertainty:

I'm not sure what this urban/suburban divide is that is constantly referenced. If it refers to the socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic challenges associated with an urban community. I'm not really sure what to anticipate in an urban education experience without resorting to stereotypes that I think do more harm than good leading into an experience. (Personal communication, February, 7, 2011)

It is a concern that preservice teachers might resort to stereotypes as their data source when they lack information or education on unique environments or conditions. Another student reflected on his vision in relationship to the setting and concluded, "My original vision seemed very reasonable and practical, until I realized it was only reasonable in an ideal setting. An ideal setting would include students that cared about success and saw value in their education" (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). The preservice teacher is clearly operating from a deficit model of students in urban communities. A third student commented that

(T)eachers do not know many of the students, students do not know many of the teachers, and nobody seems to be going the extra mile to fix this. Security is a constant presence. There is a very poor sense of community. Frankly, it feels like a prison. (Personal communication, February 7, 2011)

These detrimental perceptions of urban schools are hindrances to success and need to be addressed directly and with transparency during teacher preparation whenever possible.

It may enhance a student's experience if opportunities are constructed for students to engage and interact with the local school community in a positive way prior to the placement. Student teachers often drive in and out of the city without understanding the culture and community in a way that could help them connect with students and the local context. Activities such as culture walks, scavenger hunts, home visits, and community speaker panels are ideas for this type of engagement. The new information and experiences garnered from understanding the community will help shape a more informed vision.

Visions can be culturally biased or exclusionary (Hammerness, 2006). It is important to ensure students have time in urban settings that model best practices and provide access to high-achieving students for at least part of the time. This will increase

the likelihood that preservice teachers will be able to visualize their visions in urban schools. It is important that students are provided with a counter narrative to how the media has influenced them or what they may have experienced in former clinic placements.

### **Complete Appreciation, Acceptance and Openness to the Urban Context**

Two students demonstrated a strong desire to be in urban environments, anticipated challenges, and had strategized how to solve problems and stay optimistic. All iterations of their visions relayed a positive portrait of city schools, student potential and the impact they could have in those environments. It would be a worthwhile focus of inquiry to parse out the experiences, influences and dispositions of preservice teachers who may exhibit the concepts of a flexible vision or resilient spirit before they start or finish a teacher preparation program.

### **Conclusion**

The United States needs well-prepared teachers for urban schools. Teacher preparation programs need to deliberately focus on how to support new teachers in urban settings in order to create equitable, empowering, humanizing learning contexts (Borrero, 2001; Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; James-Wilson, 2007; Nieto, 2005). Pre-service teacher vision may be at its most formative and vulnerable state during their preparation program and can have a powerful impact on what they think is possible for themselves and their students. Constructing opportunities that assist preservice teachers in creating a flexible, yet informed vision is essential for creating the next generation of resilient teachers.

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