



## Communities as Critical Partners in Teacher Education: The Impact of Community Immersion on Teacher Candidates' Understanding of Self and Teaching in Urban Schools

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Communities play a critical role in helping teacher candidates understand the social and historical aspects of community and their impact on schools, students and families, particularly in urban communities. Communities should be integral and equal partners in preparing teachers for today's diverse schools. This paper focuses on utilizing the community as a space for preparing urban teachers. It describes a study of an urban community immersion experience in teacher education at a predominantly white institution. This qualitative study was guided by two research questions, "How have these community immersion experiences influenced candidates' understanding of self?" and "How have these experiences influenced candidates' identity as a teacher in urban schools?" Findings suggest that carefully designed community experiences can have significant impact on teacher candidates' understanding of self and their identity as teachers in urban schools.

*Keywords:* teacher education, urban education, community immersion, field experiences, elementary teacher education, diversity, teacher identity

As the student population of schools across the United States shifts to a non-White majority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), teacher education programs must become increasingly aware of the need to prepare all teachers to work effectively with diverse student populations. Milner (2010) asserts that "preparing teachers to teach is about teachers building a repertoire of knowledge, attitudes, mindsets, belief systems, and skills for success through a teacher journey; teachers develop the cognitive and analytical skills to continue learning through a process of improving their work" (p. 118). This journey must involve opportunities for teacher candidates to understand their own cultural identities, the experiences of their students and communities, and to be able to use this knowledge to create culturally responsive and relevant learning opportunities in their classrooms (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Sleeter, 2001, 2008).

Preservice teachers often "have limited knowledge of the perspectives and life circumstances of low-income and/or ethnic minority students and caregivers" (Amatea, Cholewam, & Mixon, 2012, p. 802), and lack the skills, dispositions and experiences needed to make meaningful connections with diverse students and families. Additionally, many teachers hold deficit views about their students, families of students and urban communities. This deficit thinking can cause teachers to assume that educational and economic inequities experienced by poor students, students of color and linguistically diverse students and families are attributed to deficiencies within the student and the family (Valencia, 1997). Therefore, in preparing teacher candidates for teaching diverse student populations, advocates agree that it is important for teacher candidates to become aware of their own biases and identity as teachers, learn about cultural differences and consider

how those differences may affect the learning environment (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001).

To effectively prepare all teachers and particularly teachers for urban schools, curriculum in teacher education must move from individual courses in diversity to an integrated approach to curriculum in which self-reflection, understanding of diversity and the intersection of culture and teaching is central to all experiences of teacher candidates. Milner (2010) identifies the need for teacher educators and teacher candidates to examine thoughts, ideas, images and belief systems “to more deeply understand diversity and its multiple relationships to teaching and learning” (pp. 118-119). Through a carefully constructed curriculum, teacher candidates can deepen their understanding of self and develop cultural competence to effectively work with parents, families, communities, and students of urban districts (Amatea, 2009; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2003). “When preservice teachers stay in university classrooms, they rarely have a chance to interact positively with children from culturally diverse families or children whose first language is not English” (Leland & Murtadha, 2011, p. 897). Yet, real-life experiences can provide an authentic environment for candidates to become more self-aware and reflective about themselves and their views of children, families and communities. In designing course experiences, teacher educators need to be aware of the critical role communities can play in helping teacher candidates understand the social and historical aspects of community and the impact these aspects have on schools, students and families, particularly in urban communities.

This paper explores the use of the community as a space for preparing urban teachers. The study examines the impact of community immersion experiences on teacher candidates’ development as teachers through their understanding of self and their identity as teachers in urban schools. Specifically, the study was guided by two research questions, “How have these community immersion experiences influenced candidates’ understanding of self?” and “How have these experiences influenced candidates’ identity as a teacher in urban schools?”

### **Perspective**

This study is guided by the concept of self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness, which Gay and Kirkland (2003) define as, “thoroughly analyzing and carefully monitoring both personal beliefs and instructional behaviors about the value of cultural diversity, and the best ways to teach ethnically different students for maximum positive effects” (p. 182). Self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are prerequisites to becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). As such, multicultural education

calls on teacher preparation to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to recognize and examine their own cultural backgrounds and values (Carpenter-LaGattuta, 2004; Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rodriguez, 1998). As Milner (2008) posits,

Successful teachers in urban schools envision life beyond their present situations; come to know themselves culturally, linguistically, gendered, racially, economically, and socially in relation to others; speak possibility and not destruction both inside and outside of the classroom regarding their students; care and demonstrate that care; and change their negative, deficit, counterproductive thinking in order to change their actions in the classrooms with students. (p. 1574)

Over the past twenty years, research in teacher education has dictated that candidates get to know their students outside of traditional learning environments (Waddell, 2011; Gay, 2004; Haberman, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Weiner, 1999; Zeichner, 2003, 2011). Gaining experience of other cultures and the non-technical aspects of being a teacher through direct experience in alternative learning environments can help the teacher candidate know the students more authentically and can help the teacher candidate gain a better understanding of their own background, of cultural diversity, and of how to better serve diverse groups of students (Waddell, 2011; Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001). However, it is imperative that experiences be designed to help the preservice teacher be able to apply analytical introspection through authentic engagement in critical consciousness and personal reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). “Real life experiences make the learning activities more genuine and authentic, and lessen the likelihood that students will escape the intellectual, emotional, psychological, moral, and pedagogical challenges inherent in reflection and critical consciousness” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 186).

Such experiences can impact teacher identity, with each experience contributing to the understanding of self and the development of a professional identity. Olsen (2008) states that, “Teacher development is circular even as it is also forward moving: a teacher is always collapsing the past, present, and future into a complex mélange of professional beliefs, goals, memories, and predictions while enacting practice” (p. 24). Research demonstrates that teacher identity is developed over time and experiences within teacher education can have a profound effect on this development (Gee, 2000; Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008; Merseeth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Given the fact that fieldwork serves as a critical component of professional socialization for preservice teachers, teacher educators must be diligent in their efforts to provide field

opportunities that do not perpetuate negative stereotypes of urban communities but, instead help teacher candidates understand the community, its strengths and challenges, while also providing an avenue for self-reflection and deepened understanding of self and others.

Communities can provide authentic contexts for candidates to learn more about their students and to create a genesis for talking about issues of race, ethnic diversity, class, power, privilege and social justice. By situating course experiences in communities, teacher candidates are able to discover the strengths and challenges of urban communities rather than be solely informed by preexisting assumptions, societal stereotypes and judgment. While some educators caution against using service-learning as a method of teaching multiculturalism to white students (Sperling, 2007), courses that are focused on *learning* from and about the community through attention to community strengths and social justice, can help prospective teachers better understand themselves and the communities in which they will teach. In such courses, the community is regarded as a valuable resource for teachers and for learning. Engagement with community members, understanding of community and self-reflection can help diffuse deficit-thinking through helping candidates develop cultural critical consciousness.

Calls from the literature support the need for community-based practice in teacher education, not just in the preparation for teaching, but in understanding the complex context of diversity extant in today's schools (Waddell, 2011; Cooper, 2007; Garcia, Arias, Harris, Murri, & Serna, 2010; Zeichner, 2006, 2010). Learning experiences within urban communities provide exemplary avenues for teacher education programs to help teacher candidates understand the cultures with which they will interact (Waddell, 2011; Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Murrell, 2001; Zeichner, 2003). Murrell (n.d.) emphasizes the need for community-based practice when stating that an accomplished teacher "possesses and works to build on knowledge of culture, community, and identity of children and families as the core of his/her teaching practice" (p. 2). Zeichner (2006, 2010) supports the call for utilizing communities in non-hierarchical ways as critical funds of knowledge for the preparation of teachers. Building on this research from education and the humanities, Zeichner (2010) identifies the need for third spaces in teacher education, which he defines as "hybrid spaces in preservice teacher education programs that bring together school and university-based teacher educators and practitioner and academic knowledge in new ways to enhance the learning of prospective teachers" (p. 92). Gutierrez (2008) introduced the concept of "third spaces" in her work around critical literacies. She described these "spaces" as transformative and rigorous learning environments, moments in the classroom outside of the traditional teaching paradigm, in which the cultural histories and personal experiences of

students were valued and students were empowered to make sense of learning by intertwining intellectual knowledge with personal histories and culture (Baker & Gutierrez, 2008; Gutierrez, 2008). In teacher education, Zeichner (2006, 2010, 2011) identifies these third spaces as a new paradigm in which we honor schools and communities as equal partners in the preparation of teachers. The University of Missouri, Kansas City's Institute for Urban Education and elementary teacher education programs are utilizing the community as a valuable space for preparing urban teachers.

### **Purpose**

This article describes a study of a community immersion experience in an urban focused teacher education program at a predominantly white institution in an urban community. It is an extension of a previous study in which I examined the impact of the course on candidates' perceptions of urban communities and urban teaching (Waddell, 2011). The previous study focused on candidates within the elementary education program during the summer and fall semesters of 2009. The current study examined the course as it exists within the reformed elementary education program and focuses on candidates who participated in the course during the 2011 summer semester. The study responds to the need for community immersion programs to create opportunities for reflection and critical consciousness. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of cultural immersion experiences on teacher candidates' understanding of self and their identity as a teacher in urban schools.

### **Context**

#### **Urban Teacher Education Program**

The elementary teacher education program involved in this study is part of a Teacher Quality Partnership grant project funded by the United States Department of Education (Waddell & Vartuli, n.p.). The participants in this study are the first cohort to participate in a fully reformed, clinical urban teacher education program. The two-year undergraduate professional program is field-based, in which all of the methods courses are taught in urban schools and candidate learning is guided by the experiences they encounter as teachers and teacher assistants in urban classrooms (Dewey, 1938). Guided by a social constructivist framework, candidates are immersed in the complexity of teaching in urban schools and are provided multiple experiences in observing, discussing, practicing and refining teaching and teacher actions as they construct meaning about effective teaching and form their own professional identity as a teacher in urban schools. The program immerses candidates in social constructivist experiences, in which they learn through the social construction of knowledge via authentic experiences in schools and within a community of fellow learners (Richardson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

Eighty-nine percent of all program courses are taught within urban schools and communities. These courses have been developed through a process of examining objectives of previous courses and curriculum standards and juxtaposing those with everyday experiences of teachers in urban schools. The result is courses that center on the field and on relevant connections between theory and practice. Courses are connected by essential questions and enduring understandings based on five curricular threads that permeate all phases of the program: (a) diversity and social justice; (b) integrated curriculum; (c) reflective inquiry and problem-solving; (d) culturally relevant and social constructivist pedagogy; and (e) working with students, families and communities. The program culminates in the final year, in which candidates are involved in a closely supervised year-long teaching candidacy in which they spend the entire school year working in a collaborative teaching partnership with a mentor teacher in one of the program's partner schools.

**Summer community experience.** One of the most influential and transformative experiences in the program is the Summer Community Immersion Experience. The course, in its fifth year of operation, is a required course for all candidates in the elementary program as well as those in the urban middle school cohort. This course experience was designed to help candidates “gain a better understanding of themselves as teachers in urban schools, gain a better understanding of the urban community including its challenges and resources, and develop a deep understanding of the experiences of the students and families with whom they will work” (Waddell, 2011, p. 26). The experience helps candidates understand their role beyond the classroom, helping them understand what Murrell (n.d.) identifies as “the situatedness of learning- that the setting, context and fabric of human relationships in which learning occurs is important to the quality and impact of that learning” (p. 3). The summer community experience occurs during the summer between the two professional years and assists candidates in the ongoing construction of their identity as a teacher via experiences and reflection on teaching and working within a diverse community.

Situated within a Midwestern city, the community in which the course occurs faces similar challenges as other urban areas across the United States: “failing school systems, racially segregated communities and socioeconomic divides between the inner city and outlying communities” (Waddell, 2011, p. 24; Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2011). The local news media focuses its attention on the challenges of the inner-city while ignoring similar challenges in neighboring suburban communities. Therefore, stereotypes regarding children and citizens of urban communities are often perpetuated by the media and promote the deficit-view of many preservice teachers.

This further intensifies the need for field-based programs to help teacher candidates experience the community and understand its strengths as well as the roots of its challenges.

In a post-study interview, the instructor of the summer community course defined community as, “the school districts and the neighborhoods surrounding the school districts where they will generally work” (personal communication, December 13, 2012). A goal for the course is to help the teacher candidates “be willing to explore the community in which they will teach” (personal communication, December 13, 2012). As an avenue for creating this willingness, the summer community experience utilizes the community as a third space. Through positioning learning experiences outside of schools or the traditional college campus, candidates can gain first-hand experience of the community, learning that there is much more to the community than one may have assumed from limited perspectives and lack of exploration. Candidates spend eight weeks immersed in the urban community, discovering the heterogeneity that exists within multiple smaller communities and diverse populations. Using the community as the primary location for the course allows the instructor to create opportunities for the candidates to explore, learn about, and question their assumptions about diverse areas within the community. The course is divided into three parts designed to complement and enhance one another and the candidates' construction of knowledge about self and the community. The three components of the course are opportunities for (a) campus-based experiences, (b) community-based experiences, and (c) community internships.

**Campus-based experiences.** Within the summer community experience, candidates read, discuss and analyze knowledge and phenomena of the community. While most of these opportunities occur through experiences within the community, there are also designated times for candidates to meet on campus and engage in focused dialogue. On-campus experiences include course readings and discussions about the community's diverse historical roots, the varied socioeconomic and ethnic populations within the community, and issues of racialization, segregation, and marginalization of some areas within urban communities, guest lecturers to broaden knowledge of available resources and structured dialogue about the strengths and challenges of diverse communities. Course readings include topics such as *White Privilege* (McIntosh, 1988), *Race, Real Estate and Unequal Development: The Kansas City Experience* (Gotham, 2002), *the Pedagogy of Poverty* (Haberman, 1991), and the *School to Prison Pipeline* (NAACP, 2005).

**Community-based experiences.** Another component of the course is facilitated observations and experiences within the community. Community field

trips, such as visiting and assisting at homeless shelters, exploring diverse neighborhoods, visiting community food banks, and learning about community-based centers and neighborhood associations, are one aspect of this component. Candidates also participate in simulations, such as experiencing a day without public transportation or facilitated discussions about community needs and available resources. Another activity is neighborhood exploration to develop a deepened understanding of resources within the community.

The community-based experiences provide candidates with exposure to new experiences and connections to the role of teacher and teaching in urban schools. The focus is on understanding the strengths of the community as well as understanding the “systemic, institutional, and bureaucratic barriers that can prevent teachers and students in urban education from realizing and reaching their potential” (Milner, 2008, p. 1575). Candidates learn about the challenges of overcoming institutionalized barriers, such as high numbers of students of color in juvenile detention centers and lack of access to affordable healthcare and/or adequate nutrition. Candidates also learn about cultural and historical landmarks within the community and the commitment of community residents to preserving and enhancing the richness and diversity of their communities.

**Community internships.** A final component of the course is community internship opportunities in which each student spends 40-80 hours outside of class time working with a community agency. The “internship” component of the course provides individual opportunities for candidates to learn about the network of not-for-profit agencies in the urban core and the interconnectedness of community services and experiences of families in urban communities (Waddell, 2011). Candidates set their own schedule with the community agency and work with the agency on a weekly basis during the 8-week course. Examples of community agencies in which internships occur are the local food bank, domestic violence shelters, community youth centers, retirement centers, community gardens, neighborhood associations, child development centers, homeless shelters, and faith-based organizations. Weekly, in class and via written reflections, candidates deconstruct and reflect upon their experiences and construct understanding of community, students and families, and the interface with schools and teachers. Course discussions and conversations with the instructor are carefully designed to help candidates to reflect deeply and analytically, to “check themselves” about the topics and “carefully examine their feelings about what they experience” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003) and think about the implications for teaching.

While working in the community, candidates are met with various tasks and challenges. Some candidates work with urban youth and children at child development centers or faith-based organizations, while others may

provide assistance at homeless shelters and food banks or assist with clerical work at domestic violence shelters and counseling centers. In a post-study interview with the course instructor, who also co-developed the course, she described how working at a community-operated center can be transformative for a candidate:

You know, like when the preservice teachers go to [Child Development Center]. When I first went to [Child Development Center], I'm really middle class, so I understand that. I was like, Oh my God, they just warehouse kids in here! Then you listen to the stories of the children who've grown up at [Child Development Center], and realize it was the closest thing to going over to Aunt Betty's after school that they're ever going to have. And then you ask yourself, where would these children be if you didn't have [Child Development Center]?

Through community internships the preservice teachers are doing things with the people who are already there. [The preservice teachers] are learning that they don't have all the answers. They are not bringing in all the answers, although they may be able to add something to the equation. But I feel that what they realize when they're working with people instead of disregarding what's already there, they're learning how to take what's there and look at what's positive about it and how to build on it. Or how to make their contribution to an equation that's already working... For example, when we did work with the [Neighborhood Alliance]. The students just looked at the community and they just didn't think there was anything going on down there. Then they get down there and they realize, “My God, these people have done this, this, this, and this. I can learn from them.”

Candidates not only discover the hard work needed to work with not-for-profit agencies, but also the wisdom of the people who commit their lives to enhancing and maintaining the authenticity of their communities. One example is the significance of community-based revitalization efforts, born from residents within the community. These discoveries shape the candidates' readiness for their final year in the program and impact their development as a teacher.

### **Methods**

This study examines the impact of the community experience course on teacher candidates' understanding of self and identity as a teacher in urban schools. The study was approached qualitatively, combining constructivism and grounded theory approaches by first examining the participants'

construction of knowledge through their perceptions of course experiences. The data were then analyzed in an attempt to develop theory that can inform teacher preparation for urban schools (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002).

### **Participants**

Participants were 36 teacher candidates enrolled in the field-based urban elementary or middle school teacher education program. Two candidates were studying middle school education and 34 were in the elementary program. Two candidates did not submit all requested data; therefore, 34 participants were included in the data analysis. Of these, four were graduate students working on initial teacher certification and 30 were undergraduate teacher education students. Three were male and four were students of color: two Asian, one identified as Hispanic and one as White/Hispanic. Therefore, 88% of the students were White and 76% were White female. While the self-described backgrounds of the participants varied from “a small rural town [that] was 100% white” to “middle class, suburban community” to “low to middle class community [that] was predominately African American,” 64% of the participants who volunteered background information described their communities as all or predominantly White. Thirty-six percent of these communities were described as rural and 45% were described as suburban and middle class, leaving 19% as urban.

### **Data Sources**

Data were collected throughout the 8-week summer semester through written documents, online surveys and focus groups interviews. All participants submitted written reflections, 16 candidates participated in open-ended surveys and 14 candidates participated in the voluntary focus group interviews. The online surveys were open-ended responses to questions about the course experiences such as, “How have the course expectations and field experience influenced your perceptions of the community and/or community agency?” Each participating candidate took part in two focus group sessions, one during the fourth week of the semester and one during the last week of the semester. Written documents were in the form of course reflections that candidates were asked to submit twice weekly regarding their experiences and perceptions of teaching in an urban community. Responding to a set prompt was not required, but they were all asked to reflect on their experiences. A total of 393 written reflections were collected in addition to results from 16 online surveys and 4 focus group meetings, which were professionally transcribed for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Preliminary data analysis occurred in which data were managed and analyzed through inductive analysis with an open coding approach. Open coding occurs when the researcher is open to patterns and themes that emerge

from the data (McMillan, 2000). Data were reviewed through the lens of critical consciousness with the intention of answering the two research questions, “How have these community immersion experiences influenced candidates’ understanding of self?” and “How have these experiences influenced candidates’ identity as a teacher in urban schools?”

Data were separated into three data sets: reflections, surveys and focus group transcripts, and each data set was analyzed separately. Within each data set, content analysis occurred, in which the researcher reviewed the data for recurring words and phrases that related to understanding of self and/or identity as a teacher. Data were then grouped into categories and categories were analyzed repeatedly through axial coding until themes emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once each data set was analyzed, triangulation was attempted by cross-checking themes across all data sets (Patton, 2002).

Analysis to determine possible themes occurred by the researcher reviewing the data multiple times for words and phrases that related to the candidate’s thought process, awareness of self, emotions and/or examples of metacognition. A second round of analysis occurred through identification of words and phrases related to the candidate as teacher in urban schools. Themes were determined by grouping similar categories. At the conclusion of the analysis, a total of three themes emerged relating to the understanding of self and a development of critical consciousness and two themes emerged relating to teacher identity. Themes that emerged as prevalent were those that appeared across all three data sets.

## **Findings**

### **Understanding of Self**

Three themes emerged related to the candidates’ understandings of self and the development of critical consciousness. The three most prevalent themes were (a) awareness of own naivety, (b) awareness of privilege, and (c) reflection on self and others’ perspectives.

**Awareness of naivety.** The most prevalent theme regarding candidates’ understanding of self was the realization of candidates’ own naivety about the community and issues of racialization and segregation. This finding is consistent with Gay and Kirkland’s (2003) claim that, “some teacher education students even believe that race and racism are non-issues, and are no longer problems in U.S. society and schools” (p. 184). Throughout this study, candidates repeatedly described the summer community experience as “eye-opening” and “shocking.” Candidates reflected frequently about their “sheltered lives” and the fact that many of the realities encountered in the course were issues they had “never thought about” or were issues of injustice, racialization, segregation and oppression that they did not previously think related to their community. Often, candidates

explicitly stated, "I was so naïve." In her journal, Courtney, a White female from what she describes as, "the Whitest of towns," wrote, "I was extremely sheltered before this class and I never realized it." Likewise, Julie, also a White female, wrote, "I was able to see how isolated my life has been and how naïve I have been."

With the heightened awareness of naivety, candidates also reflected on the new knowledge they gained as a result of taking this course. Reflections in journals included comments about students who learned new information about the community. Lisa, a White female wrote, "I've realized that I know very little about a place I have lived my entire life. I have learned that [our city] does not just contain UMKC and the [upscale shopping area]." Similarly, Sophie, who describes herself as "White/Hispanic" wrote, "I find it shocking how complex [our city] is in regards to social issues. Furthermore, I find it shocking that I know so little about it." Courtney echoed her previous comments and demonstrated her new awareness of the strengths of the city, in response to the online survey she stated:

I have learned so much I can't even describe. I have lived in the [city] area my entire life and [our instructor] is showing me things I have never seen before. This class has opened my eyes to a world I've looked at but never really seen.

Samantha, a Hispanic female discovered that her naivety came from her new awareness of racial segregation. In a written reflection she wrote:

As we toured the facility, I noticed the male population was all African American with only ONE white male. I began wondering why. There is something wrong with the picture I was seeing... I'm beginning to put together how racially divided the metropolitan area is. Although I've studied the civil rights movements and would like to think we've come so much further with integration of all cultures, I'm beginning to think [our city] missed that boat.

**Awareness of privilege.** Gay and Kirkland (2003) assert that, "[preservice teachers] do not realize the privilege, presumption, and entitlement that are embedded in using their personal outsider knowledge and limited experiences" (p. 183). A second theme, awareness of privilege, demonstrates the community experience brought to surface an understanding of privilege. Candidates reflected on their own background and resources and the fact that many had not realized they had lived a privileged life. Some candidates were able to name the privilege, such as Brooke, who expressed her understanding through her journal in stating, "I have seen how privilege has influenced my life... The ways in which I discover each day how privileged I am have

exponentially grown through this experience in this course." Connie, also a White female, reflected on the daily privileges her background has afforded her,

I know I take for granted, toothbrush and toothpaste, medical insurance, deodorant, a loving family, etc. It is so easy to assume that everyone has a roof over their heads, food on the table, heating and clean water, access to a shower, clean clothes, etc.

Other candidates began discovering that they had spent much of their lives privileged by way of their own ignorance and the fact that they lived in communities in which they thought they had been sheltered from everyday injustices. Kathy, a White female, responded to an online survey by stating, "I have noticed, however, that I have been isolated from much of the daily happenings of the city. It is easy to have misinformation, and be unknowledgeable about a system, when you never encounter the system from all angles." Robert, a White male, also responded to the online survey; he explained the ways in which privilege and guilt can control what one chooses to reflect upon:

Most people understand that every community faces a complex web of problems; most of the time we choose to ignore these problems because thinking about them makes us feel guilty; this is because we are exposed to problems via the news, and the news very rarely tells us how to help. This class has exposed us to this web in a very constructive way. By constructive I mean that we are now aware of how to untangle the complex web of problems without feeling guilty.

Marcie, a White student from a suburban area also grappled with the ways privilege often shelters one from the realities of others:

There are so many things I have never thought about simply because I have never experienced them before and didn't even know I should think about them, but now I have heard it or experienced it and know how to interact with others in a much better way.

**Reflection on self and others' perspectives.** A final theme related to the development of critical consciousness was candidates' deep reflection of self and other people's perspectives. Gay and Kirkland (2003) cite Strong (2002) in stating that: "analytical introspection, continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and the recurring transformation of beliefs and skills that are essential elements of self-reflection" (p. 182). As the community immersion course progressed, candidates became increasingly reflective about themselves and others. For some candidates new awareness was discovered through examining their thoughts and

assumptions about others. Experiences throughout the summer provided opportunities for candidates to become more aware of their own thinking patterns and assumptions of others. Some of these revelations occurred through course readings and discussions while other revelations were discovered as candidates interacted within the community. Some candidates, such as Connie, became acutely aware of their own thought processes and the need to become more aware and reflective of their assumptions. In a class journal Connie wrote, "Though I wish I could say I do not have any prejudices, I do, unfortunately. I catch myself thinking in ways in which I know I should not be thinking, realizing my own prejudices and hoping to stop them in their tracks." Diane, also a White female, discovered her past thought processes and the need to increase her own awareness of her assumptions:

I made the assumption that these kids have parents that do not want them or are tied up in drugs and alcohol. I was wrong, [for] some kids this is true, but not all. Making these assumptions about these kids is wrong of me to do. I will take this lesson learned into my teaching as well as my life.

Samantha, a Hispanic female, also became aware of her thought processes when writing, "I am so naive. How and why had I come up with these stories in my head about the children of [Child Development Center]? I really don't know." In a tearful moment during a focus group interview, Marcie shared thoughts about her recognition of thought patterns and underlying assumptions. She stated:

I've been in class or out when we're doing things and I just am hit with wrong thinkings or different judgments I had in my own heart that I didn't realize were there that have been there since I learned when I was little and now I'm having to face them to get rid of them... which is for me a good thing because I don't want to, I don't want to walk into a classroom, um, sorry, I don't want to walk into a classroom with tons of judgments in my heart towards anyone, towards any of my students.

As candidates became more aware of their own biases, assumptions and thought processes, they also began reflecting on their own growth and the challenge of interacting with others who may hold different beliefs about diversity and community involvement. As their own deficit lens got smaller, they began becoming aware of the deficit thinking of others. This awareness was revealed as they struggled with other people's perceptions and the anger or frustration that accompanied these thoughts. Candidates reflected about the ways in which their new knowledge, understandings and awareness became a

source of empowerment in their conversations with others. In the final focus group interview, Julie explained:

I think what's great about it too is, by me experiencing it and learning about it... and now because you've experienced it and learned, you can actually talk to them about it, and help them see things clearly too, and that has been awesome too, because there's just so many people I know that never grew up in the inner-city and it's not that they wanted to have these wrong views, they just have no paradigm for it, and so I'm able to talk with them and have good discussions and help them see things the right way too, which I think is, the more people that can see things the way they really are, the better, I think.

In other situations, candidates reflected about how their new knowledge and passion seemed to place a strain on their relationships with family, friends and coworkers. Connie reflected in a journal about her new awareness of other people's assumptions and her own struggles in talking with them, understanding the danger of judging others as she may have once been judged:

Then I come across people... and their overwhelming prejudices and discrimination taking over the true right and wrong. Again, I am faced with the uncertainty of how to address the peers who show they have lack of understanding of the urban community and the people who come from it.

Vonda, a non-traditional White female, shared how she has a new sense of confidence when talking to her family about her experiences:

And it's just a misconception that people have, and I feel now that I'm out in the community that I've experienced some of that, I'm a lot more educated to stick up for something or talk to them in an educated way and say you know that's not how it is, you know what I mean, whereas before, I just didn't know, and it was just an ignorance.

**Imbedded emotions.** Multicultural educators agree that the development of critical consciousness and becoming culturally responsive educators can be emotionally daunting tasks. As preservice teachers learn about themselves, others and the context of urban education, emotions such as guilt and resistance are common. Although not prevalent as themes, imbedded in the aforementioned themes were many strong emotions. Within each theme, candidate reflections were underscored with conflicting emotions including shame, anger and excitement.

**Shame.** Candidates conveyed feelings of shame in their awareness of privilege as well as their awareness of their own perceptions and thought processes. Candidates



indicated or implied their shame and embarrassment of their own naivety and the ways in which they may have taken advantage of privilege even if they were not consciously aware of their actions. This shame was also conveyed as candidates noticed changes in their perspectives and became aware of their previously held assumptions and perceptions of others.

**Anger.** Throughout the data sets, expressions of anger and frustration were common. Most of this anger stemmed from the injustices of which they were becoming aware and/or those to which they were being re-introduced. Many of the injustices were related to racialization and segregation in the community or city as a whole, while some anger was directed at those injustices perpetrated against children, such as zero tolerance policies, low expectations and low-level instructional practices, and disparities in health and human services.

**Excitement.** Throughout the data sets, candidates also conveyed a sense of excitement about teaching in urban communities. Many candidates reflected that the experience caused them to want to learn more and become more involved in the community. Candidates also shared that their desires to teach in urban schools were confirmed by the summer experience. Many of the experiences also caused candidates to feel motivated as teachers and look forward to the opportunities to teach in urban communities, as the experience affirmed their commitment to social justice and to teaching in urban schools.

### **Identity and Urban Teachers**

Throughout the first professional program, candidates participate in activities regarding student-centered and culturally responsive teaching. However, as they are not yet developing comprehensive lesson plans or working daily with the same group of students, they have not yet fully applied the concepts of culturally-responsive teaching. During the final year of the program, candidates work full-time as a co-teacher in a year-long teaching experience; they learn how to apply the conceptual framework of the program to their teaching. Therefore, the summer experience is an opportunity to increase candidates' readiness for learning and applying culturally responsive and student centered pedagogy.

In analyzing the data for word and phrases related to teacher identity, it became clear that the summer experience reinforced and highlighted the importance of teachers knowing their students and using this knowledge to guide their actions as teachers and meet student needs. Two primary themes emerged across all data sets: (a) the importance building relationships with students and (b) a reinforcement of individual teaching philosophy. Although these areas are connected to one another, each emerged as a critical individual theme in the candidates' reflection about being a teacher in an urban community.

**Relationships with students.** In reviewing the data for possible indicators of the course's impact on candidates' identity as a teacher in urban schools, the most prevalent theme, and one that underscores all other themes, is that of the importance of building relationships with students. As candidates reflected and talked about themselves as teachers, their focus was on the importance of relationships with students and the teacher's critical influence on the lives of their students. The experiences of the course affirmed candidates' belief that they can only be effective if they have authentic and trusting relationships with students.

Emma, a White candidate, reflected in a journal by stating, "I need to understand where my students come from in order [for me] to create a personal relationship with them. If there is a personal relationship, then the students will trust me and I can teach them more successfully." Vonda shared similar sentiments when reflecting in the online survey:

I believe that every child can learn and every child has the potential to bring something unique and special to the world and to my classroom. I will help children to develop their potential by believing in them and building relationships with them.

For many candidates, the importance of knowing students was affirmed, while for others, it became a new or heightened priority for their role as teacher in an urban community. In two separate journal entries a White female named Cheryl reflected on the power of knowing students through authentic relationships. In an early journal, when reflecting on her plans for her field placement, Cheryl wrote, "I first wanted to build relationships with the kids there-I wanted to know their stories and what made them feel happy, sad, angry, loved, and frustrated. I also wanted to build respect." The power of relationship building was reinforced by the end of the semester, when Cheryl wrote:

I felt like today was a really great day in my attempts to build a relationship with the kids at the center... I felt like we got to see each other for who we really were during that time-just a group of people having fun and enjoying one another's company. Today was a really good day-I am realizing how sad I am going to be when this summer ends and I no longer get to see these people. I have had the best time with the staff and getting to know the kids. In my [classroom] I plan on engaging in some intense relationship building with the class I will be teaching in-I want and need relationships built upon respect and caring.

Kathy summed up the impact of the course on candidates' understanding of the need for building

relationships and being student-centered when she reflected in a journal stating:

As a future teacher, I am constantly thinking about how I can be an effective teacher. When I first started the program, most of my thinking was centered on curriculum: what lessons would I teach, how would I make them interesting, what will my units be about? As I have continued through the program, I have learned that the first step to becoming an effective teacher is not the curriculum, but the relationship with your class. Urban education is not comprised of the elements of my grade school experience; it has to be molded to the children's lives.

**Reinforcement of individual teaching philosophy.** As candidates reflected on themselves as teachers, individual philosophies of teaching were reinforced and expanded. Through working with children and youth at various community agencies, reading and learning about the impact of schools on student livelihood, and through opportunities to interact with students and families within the community, candidates reflected on the need to create democratic classrooms with meaningful and active learning opportunities for students. The experiences reinforced the program's social constructivist philosophy of teaching and affirmed the candidates' own philosophies of teaching through culturally responsive, democratic and constructivist practices.

Andrea, who completed her field experience at a summer day camp, wrote about how the experience impacted her commitment to her educational philosophy: I did so by deciding which aspects of the program fit my educational philosophy and also exploring why I believe these elements are essential to how I want my classroom to look, feel like, and also be managed... I am a firm believer in constructivism. This means that students are given opportunities to construct knowledge through new experiences and building off of what they already know.

For Kathy, the experience allowed her to reaffirm her role as a change agent and activist for educational equity:

As a teacher, I have to be a change agent and create a classroom that has an equal authority between the students and me, allowing students a say in what they learn and how they learn. Allowing students to become a part of their own learning gives them reason, which elicits motivation.

Midway through the semester, in a journal entry, Robert, a White male, reflected on his commitment to a student-centered classroom:

It reinforces my current belief that... I also need to create a classroom curriculum that continually respects, and incorporates who

my children are at their core; this includes meeting there culturally (sic) needs as well as their individual needs. This will not be an easy task, and I may fail many times, but by recognizing this I am already on my way to being a successful educator.

Although the summer community experience is not a pedagogical course, it was able to provide experiences that illuminated the need for student-centered and culturally responsive classrooms. In a final journal reflection, Michelle, a White student from a rural community demonstrated how the course is a precursor to the following semester's courses in which students will learn to apply this philosophy in their classrooms. Michelle sums up the semester in stating, "It also has started my reflection of how my identity and being culturally aware of my students' identity will help me become a more effective teacher."

#### **Limitations**

As with any study involving a course, limitations to this study existed. Although the researcher was not the instructor of the course, she was the coordinator of the urban education programs. The candidates were aware that their journals were being reviewed by the researcher which creates the possibility that candidates will share opinions they believe are "what the instructor wants to hear." Three attempts were made to control for this bias. (1) The instructor and researcher assured the candidates that the content of the journals was not considered in assigning course grades, (2) we communicated that we would not discuss the content of the journals with one another during the course semester and (3) the instructor worked to establish a classroom environment "where candidates feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings without the fear of being politically incorrect or judged by others" and environments in which they are given permission to be "who they are" and grow from there" (Waddell, 2011, p. 34).

Another limitation pertains to the long-term impact of the course experiences. Since data was collected over the summer the course was delivered, it captures the impact of the course at a point in time rather than the long-term impact of the course on the candidates' future teaching practices. A follow-up study that will examine the practices and beliefs of the candidates after they begin their teaching careers is currently being planned.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this study make it clear that community immersion experiences can have a profound effect on teacher candidates' understanding of self and can be critical in the formation of individual candidate's development of cultural critical consciousness as their identity as a teacher in urban communities develops. Throughout the course, candidates reflected on the ways in which the course impacted their personal and professional growth

and affirmed or influenced their understanding of teaching in an urban community. The findings demonstrate that community immersion can impact teacher candidates' understanding of their own identity and affirm the need for candidates to understand the students, families and communities in which they will teach. The study findings are aligned with the recommendations that opportunities to work and interact in urban communities can influence the ways in which teacher candidates work with students, parents, families and communities. The findings demonstrate that candidates are beginning to understand the "*situatedness* of learning", the "view that resists the separation of schooling from the everyday world of students" (Murrell, n.d., p. 3).

The findings not only affirm the need for teacher education to embrace community-based practice as a significant component in the preparation of teachers, but the findings can also provide a guide into the curricular components that are essential for teacher education. The findings provide support for Gay and Kirkland's (2003) recommendations that teacher education design learning experiences focusing on issues of diversity, social justice and power and privilege and that provide scaffolding of analytical and critical self-reflection to help develop cultural critical consciousness. These skills are critical to the development of culturally aware, community-minded and culturally responsive teachers. With the current focus on testing and accountability, many teacher education programs are placing sole or primary importance on the technical aspects of teaching and are at risk of becoming focused on test scores and measures of academic achievement to the detriment of the human and cultural aspects of effective teaching. This position is supported by Zeichner (2010) when he states, "these efforts involve a shift in the epistemology of teacher education from a situation where academic knowledge is seen as the authoritative course of knowledge about teaching to one where different aspects of expertise that exist in schools and communities are brought into teacher education and coexist on a more equal plane with academic knowledge" (p. 95).

The themes that have emerged from this study indicate that opportunities for candidates to learn and explore communities and the role communities' play in the lives of urban youth and families can be valuable learning opportunities and aid candidates in their understanding of self and their identity as teacher in urban schools. In the final reflection of the semester, an overwhelming majority of candidates expressed their belief in the value and necessity of the course. This sentiment is captured in the words of Marcie, a White female candidate:

The community summer experience is of extreme value and importance... It seems irresponsible and prideful to think you could

teach anyone without knowing [your students and community]. This program makes each person come face to face with their lack of knowledge and judgments about the inner city, but also helps them see what kind of teacher they want to be and what areas they can grow in to be a better teacher...this class has caused me to grow as a person and as a teacher.

Each of the themes revealed in the data can inform the teacher education curriculum and shape interactions and opportunities for the development of self-reflection, cultural critical consciousness and teacher identity. However, although community immersion programs are a critical first step in designing community-based teacher education programs, there is danger in thinking that such classes or experiences are the silver bullet in preparing community-minded educators. If left to only one class or isolated experience, there is danger that full processing of experiences and revelations will not occur and instead prejudices, deficit thinking and assumptions may be perpetuated because we did not allow ample time for processing, questioning of self, deep reflection and construction of meaning.

Each candidate brings varying life experiences and a different professional readiness for understanding him or herself, others and the community. Therefore, we must be cognizant of the fact that even with meaningful experiences, if isolated or not placed within a sequence designed to help students understand themselves and others and not done so in a manner that can help candidates become comfortable "checking themselves" and examining their beliefs (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 184), there is danger that candidates will leave the experience with misconceptions of the context and the experience. For example, as stated previously, the community in this study is extremely economically and racially segregated and some course experiences illuminate this reality. Through experiencing other cultures and exposure to different areas of the city, along with careful scaffolding of experiences by the course instructor and opportunities for deep self-reflection, candidates developed a deepened awareness of their own economic and racial backgrounds. Many of the 32 White candidates in the sample experienced racial segregation for what they believed to be the first time in their life. For some of these candidates, it was the first time they were not in the racial majority and, therefore, their whiteness became illuminated. James, a non-traditional White male, reflected in his journal stating, "When I finally made it to [street], it was like I was in another world: a world I have never experienced, due to my middle-class, white upbringing." Courtney shared related thoughts when writing, "I lived in a white community, went to school in a white community, and worked in a white community; white communities were all I ever knew until this class."

While the awareness of racial diversity and their own backgrounds is an important first step in understanding issues of race, class and diversity, there is danger that candidates will only see the experience through a racial lens. When this occurs, the learning can be diminished and negative assumptions can be unknowingly perpetuated. However, with attention to the development of cultural critical consciousness through a dedicated teacher education program, this obstacle can be overcome.

Therefore, the placement of such experiences within a teacher education program, the deconstruction of these experiences and the connection between learning that occurs in the community immersion course and other program experiences must be given careful and strategic thought. The non-instructional themes that emerged: awareness of privilege, awareness of naivety, self-reflection and the importance of building relationships with and knowing students, are each significant and developmental discoveries that can and should be themes spiraled throughout a teacher preparation program. These themes are also concepts that must be constructed and developed over time. They cannot be converted to technical pieces of knowledge learned through one-dimensional textbooks or memorizing the “facts”, instead, they are each significant repertoires of knowledge that candidates must discover within themselves on their journey to becoming a community teacher.

#### **Implications for Current Program**

Within the teacher education program involved in this study, the placement of the course and the connection between this and other courses has been under evaluation since the first year the course was taught. The course was originally part of a small pilot program that was taught during the first summer of the program, prior to the first professional year. Previous studies of the course demonstrated impact on candidates’ understanding of self and community (Waddell, 2011), yet changes in the course have been warranted. Feedback from students, cooperating teachers and faculty supervisors influenced the decision to require the course for all elementary candidates and to move the course to the summer between the two professional programs. The first decision was based on feedback indicating a need for all candidates to have the experience. The change in sequence of the course was based on feedback in examining the appropriate time and candidate readiness for the course as well as the potential for impact of the course on program graduates. Placing the course in the summer before the year-long teaching experience allowed the program to strategically place other courses in urban education and diversity before the course, serving as a foundation for the course experiences. Sequencing the course before the final year also creates an opportunity for candidates to apply course learning immediately after the experience while in their year-long teaching experience (that occurs

during the second year of the professional program). Recent changes also include the addition of a pre-requisite course on understanding race, power and privilege. Studies of the impact of such program decisions are currently in progress.

#### **Conclusion**

As teacher education programs continue on the journey of reform, it is important that they engage in self-study and evaluate the impact of decisions on candidate learning, development of candidate self-reflection, cultural critical consciousness, candidate identity and the interconnectedness of courses and courses experiences. It is also important to explore how experiences impact the development different candidates; therefore, a study examining the impact of the experiences on students of color as compared to White students and students with urban backgrounds compared to those with suburban or rural backgrounds is needed. Although differences in these groups were not apparent in this study, an examination of data collected from cohorts over the past five years would provide a large enough sample to determine if ethnicity and background are a factor influencing the impact of this course. A result of such a study could inform how we are designing experiences that meet the needs of all candidates as we prepare them to teach within diverse communities.

As we continue to examine the impact of teacher education and the preparedness of our graduates, we must be deliberate in attending to all aspects of teacher education. A focus on community-based practice, cultural critical consciousness and culturally responsive and community informed teaching must be included along with the technical aspects of learning to teach. The technical aspects of learning to teach can remain significant components of teacher preparation but they must be carefully aligned with opportunities for candidates to grow and develop as individuals as they solidify their identity as beginning teachers.

Teacher education is not just about the technical aspects of learning to teach, but the development of culturally aware and community-minded individuals who can and will become effective teachers for the nation’s diverse student populations. Community-based experiences and a focus on the development of the identity of the community-minded and culturally responsive teacher are essential components of a multifaceted approach to preparing the teachers all children deserve.

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