Educating Teachers for Urban Schools

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*Abstract*: There is something extremely difficult about the teacher education field. Pre-service teachers are inundated with theory and then have to navigate how to turn their classroom knowledge into practical knowledge. Teacher educators labor over how to create meaningful experiences for candidates and try to cram in a lifetime’s worth of knowledge, often in a very short period of time. This capstone is based upon the idea that teachers can be effectively trained, especially to work in urban areas through student-teaching experiences. The aspects that contribute to meaningful and educational experiences are varied and multiple. Student teaching is absolutely critical for the pre-service teacher, the cooperating teacher is a key participant, good teachers are not necessarily good cooperating teachers, learning to be a good mentor can be a tedious process for the cooperating teacher, and compatibility is an important factor to consider in the selection of a teaching environment. Therefore, a perfect setup would be one where the pre-service teaching candidate is with a cooperating teacher who is culturally competent and understanding of the community in which they teach, who has sound pedagogical skill, in a school whose philosophies and curriculum line up with what the university is teaching. Additionally, many pre-service teachers should be exposed to urban environments as that is where some of them will likely be working. This capstone consists of three sections: the first, a literature review on various perspectives regarding teacher education and its place in urban education, the second, a perspective on the research regarding student teaching experiences, and the third, recommendations for teacher education and further research.

**Educating Teachers for Urban Schools**

What is it that is so difficult about training effective teachers? In this time, what are the actual responsibilities of an educator and who defines them? If the answer is solely content-based, then the only teacher preparation needed should be making physicists, mathematicians, historians, authors, etc., and all would be well. However, it is widely held and acknowledged that teaching requires far more than a grasp of content knowledge alone. It is a position that necessitates a grasp of people knowledge, managing other people, engaging, connecting, serving, and caring. It often means giving up one’s own preferences for the good of students, setting up appropriate boundaries, and seeking to understand the perspective of students.

The training of this type of educator has long been a controversial topic within the field. While there are some course topics that seem intuitive, such as content-area knowledge and classroom management, there are a plethora of others that are seen as essential in one program and unimportant in others, for example, multicultural education and how to teach diverse learners. While many universities maintain a traditional approach with a four-year degree including internships and student teaching, there are alternate programs that have become more prevalent within the last decade. Some of these alternative programs have even begun to allow second-career teachers to become certified while in the midst of classroom teaching. There are success and failure stories from each of these approaches. What is a teacher education program supposed to do? Traditional teacher education seems to focus on the nameless, faceless, generic child who may give the teacher some trouble, but ultimately shares the same goal as the teacher does, however the newer vernacular suggests that there is not one generic student, that there is wide variation in how students of different races, ethnicities, genders, and cultures learn.

In the current era, it seems that more and more programs seem to be looking at new ways of training teachers, realizing the multicultural nature that will most likely be experienced by teachers. For example, how can classroom management be taught in a way that reflects the differences in student populations? How is a teacher educator supposed to disseminate the idea that other factors besides content learning are salient when students live in poverty? How can teachers be taught to work within district curricular restraints while remaining true to their own philosophies and the ideology of their university? There are numerous aspects of teacher education that can be examined, but this capstone focuses on how to increase learning opportunities in student teaching experiences and how the role of mentors for new teachers can positively impact attrition within the first few teaching years. The specific context of teacher education is for teachers in urban environments. This paper will consist of three sections: the first, a literature review on various perspectives regarding teacher education and its place in urban education, the second, a perspective on the research regarding student teaching experiences, and the third, recommendations for teacher education and further research.

**Teacher Education Perspectives**

The philosophical perspective on teacher education varies widely. Urban educational researchers such as Martin Haberman believed that teachers are born, not made. In his literature on “star teachers,” the teacher, in his view, is able to demonstrate persistence, protect students as learners, apply generalities sparingly, successfully respond to “at-risk” students, develop a professional rather than personal relationship with students, avoid burnout, and successfully navigate their own and their students’ fallibility (Haberman, 1995). While most would agree that these traits are necessary, Haberman said that many, if not most, of these qualities are innate to the teacher and their experience. They cannot be taught to those who do not hold the personal characteristics. His strong emphasis was on teacher selection instead of teacher training, maintaining that skills can be honed, but cannot be bestowed. He created a quiz and a list of the various characteristics of teacher candidates that show the most potential to be “stars” in their classrooms. The most salient characteristic of Dr. Haberman’s work is his belief that his system works and that the star qualities cannot and *are not taught*, they are inherent to the person when they come into the profession.

Researchers such as Richard Milner have a different viewpoint. “Preparing teachers to teach is about teachers building a repertoire of knowledge, attitudes, mindsets, belief systems, and skills for success through a teaching journey; teachers develop the cognitive and analytic skills to continue learning through processes of improving their work” (Milner, 2010, p. 118). Terms such as ‘building’ and ‘develop’ imply that all teachers do not necessarily start with certain skills, but that they can be taught. His work focuses on what teacher education programs need to train for the diversity teachers can and will encounter when they enter the profession. His ideology follows the idea that once the teacher candidates are aware of their own biases, they will be able to successfully navigate those ideas when they are faced with the reality of the classroom. It is also important to note that his recommendations are not only geared toward students that want to teach in urban spaces; rather he seeks to educate all teachers, so that regardless of whether they end up in an upper-middle class school with one or two students of color or an urban school, they are able to teach to the best of their abilities.

Why should there be a specific focus placed on urban education? The trend for all teachers has been that as many as 25% leave the profession following their first year with nearly half leaving within five years. In urban education, these rates can be as much as 50% higher (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 323). Logically, it seems to follow that these teachers were not prepared for the demands of the job and chose to leave instead of to keep working in the field. For the purposes of this paper, urban education is defined as schools having more than half of students on free or reduced-lunch (indicating low socioeconomic status), situated within a large city, and often containing a large quantity of students of color. When teachers enter programs knowing that they want to teach in urban environments, they are much more likely to stay not only in the teaching profession, but also to continue working with urban youth (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 329). There is, however, a portion of graduates teacher education programs that do not necessarily go into their programs knowing that they will work in urban environment, but will still end up in that setting due to job openings.

The teaching force is primarily made up of many young, White women who are raised around other middle-class Whites and therefore have little experience with people of color (Gay, 2000, p. 46). They have often not been exposed to people of other cultures or races in their own schooling experiences, including attending universities where they are still in homogenous environments. Due to the changing racial demographics in schools, many of these teachers will be put into teaching jobs where they are responsible for teaching students in urban settings. If teacher educators do not take the time to teach methods of cultural competency and to expose students to others outside of their own racial group, it seems unlikely that this ability will simply manifest itself naturally once a teacher is faced with a group of students whose backgrounds differ greatly from her own. It is the job of teacher educators to provide opportunities for this type of learning.

According to Spanierman, et al. (2011) when teachers are not aware of cultural differences that may exist between themselves and their students, there is a troubling trend of teachers having lowered academic expectations, over-referrals to special education classes, and academic and social failure for their students of color.

Cultural competency is, for this use, regarding the way that teachers are able to relate to students equitably whose culture differs from their own. It is not simply knowing every individual student’s culture and attempting to enter it themselves, rather it is a way to relate to students to be able to teach them effectively. Spanierman, et al. (2011) argued:

“Multicultural teaching competency is an iterative process in which teachers continuously (a) explore their attitudes and beliefs about multicultural issues, (b) increase their understanding of specific populations, and (c) examine the impact this awareness and knowledge has on what and how they teach as well as how they interact with students and their families. This dynamic process involves complex interaction among micro-level systems or proximal factors (e.g., teachers and other educational personnel, students and their families, and so forth) and macro-level systems or more distal factors (e.g., political economy, race relations, public policy, and so forth). (p. 444 – 445).

When students of color are increasing in schools, teachers face the need to not only understand their students, but also how to foster positive relations amongst students. Intuitively navigating how to assist relations does not seem to be a trait that teacher educators can assume that prospective teachers come into universities already possessing. Without recognizing their own racial positionality, teachers may assume a stance of “colorblindness” which can result in an inability to see discrepancies in the discipline, grading, attitudes, and behaviors toward students of color. When teachers are unable to acknowledge and appreciate the cultural background of their students, they are often likely to set lower expectations, punish for subjective behaviors, and over-refer to special education classes (Spanierman, 2011, p. 441).

Dewey (1991) says that “most persons are quite unaware of the distinguishing peculiarities of their own mental habit. They take their own mental operations for granted and unconsciously make them the standard for judging the mental processes of others. Hence there is the tendency to encourage everything within a pupil which agrees with this attitude, and to neglect or fail to understand whatever is incongruous with it” (p. 48- 49). This is especially dangerous within the teaching profession when teachers are unable to reach their students because they have only their own, often very limited, experiences from which to draw. If Dewey is indeed correct, then teachers must be made aware of their mental habits and cognizant of the fact that they may be teaching students who do not relate to school or teachers in the same way that they did.

In an attempt to prepare teachers for urban settings, teacher education has tried to implement certain degree requirements. Classes focusing on humanities and some sociocultural viewpoints have been mandated in some programs. Not every teacher action can necessarily be modified, but those things that can be altered with awareness such as expectations, stereotyping, and language habits are the responsibility of teacher training programs (Townsend, 2002, p. 736). Since statistically it seems that teachers over-refer children of color to special education services, it seems normal to expect teachers to be able to learn new ways of handling student’s needs. The sociopolitical climate in schools seems to be one in which teachers choose to blame students or their families for real or perceived educational deficits. It seems to me that it would be far more effective for teachers to learn strategies and skills that assist them in the development of students, in order to control what they can control instead of focusing on what they perceive as being wrong with students. It is arguable that the most important experience that takes place in a pre-service candidate’s experience is student teaching. This is one of the first opportunities to bridge the theory that they have learned with the real-world responsibilities of teaching.

**Student Teaching**

The student-teaching experience is difficult to navigate for various reasons. Zeichner (2002) lays out some of those reasons: student teaching is absolutely critical for the pre-service teacher, the cooperating teacher is a key participant, good teachers are not necessarily good cooperating teachers, learning to be a good mentor can be a tedious process for the cooperating teacher, and compatibility is an important factor to consider in the choosing of a teaching environment. Therefore a perfect setup would be one where the pre-service teaching candidate is in the grade level where he or she is most comfortable, with a cooperating teacher who knows exactly when to step in and when to hold back, what advice is most beneficial, in a school whose philosophies and curriculum line up with what the university is teaching. How interesting it would be to research teacher outcomes if that were the case. Instead, oftentimes there is a disconnect between the university and the cooperating teacher (Zeichner, 2002), pre-service teachers subordinate their training to the demands of the classroom within which they are working, (Sleeter, 2001) and students are unable to find their own professional identities in finding a balance between the curriculum mandates and their learned education theory (Anderson & Stillman, 2011).

In their 2011 research study, Anderson and Stillman studied the effect of placing student teachers in urban schools. They found that overall the student teachers had a positive experience because they learned what working in an urban environment would look like and they felt that it was “nurturing emerging professional identities and conferring new self-confidence” (p. 450). One of the most important challenges that the pre-service teachers seemed to face was that of knowing what they needed to do in order to respond when their training ran against the grain of what they were experiencing. This happened in respect to curriculum and within teacher/student relationships. With the curriculum, some of the teachers found themselves in situations where the curriculum was so heavily prescriptive (as it often is in failing schools) that they did not understand how they could use their creativity in order to add to the overall lessons that they were teaching students. They knew what they had learned within their own training, but struggled when their ideas were incongruent with those of their cooperating teachers. This also happened with the relationships between the classroom students, the student teachers, and the cooperating teachers. In some instances, the cooperating teacher had a deficit view of the students’ abilities and here there were opportunities for the pre-service teachers to actually contradict those notions, which in turn strengthened their own ideas regarding teacher expectations. The study found that sometimes the strong pre-service teachers actually influenced the cooperating teachers ideas as well.

Sleeter (2001) found that a cursory overview of diversity prior to student teaching in urban settings does not necessarily correlate well teaching effective practices or breaking down the stereotypes that student teachers may bring into their experience. Her research yielded mixed reviews on whether or not it is a sound plan to have pre-service teachers do their student teaching in urban schools. On the one hand, some studies found that teachers did leave their experiences with a better understanding of what teaching in an urban school would be like and they were able to have some of their negative stereotypes debunked. However, Sleeter cites two other studies where the teachers viewed their students and the environments through lenses of cultural deficiency. Although the purpose was to change negative views, in these situations, some of the stereotypes were actually reinforced, indicating that the student teachers were filtering out the positive aspects in order to fit their preconceived notions. She also found that sometimes when teacher candidates wanted to teach multiculturalism in white environments, their ideas were subverted by their cooperating teachers. Additionally, some those who were placed in urban schools were unprepared for the environments that they would be facing.

At its best, student teaching provides a platform for new teachers to explore their own boundaries as well as experiencing some on the job training. At its worst, some student teachers have such negative student teaching experiences that they leave the profession entirely. From personal experience, I observed an undergraduate fellow pre-service teacher placed into an urban, elementary classroom with no idea that that was the student population that she would be working with. She quickly found herself disillusioned with the demands of the job and, though she had an elementary education degree and certificate, she never entered the classroom.

So what is the ideal solution? Where should teachers be placed and how can their experiences be maximized? Most teacher education programs do have a student teaching component. It does, however, look somewhat different from program to program. In most instances, student teaching is done prior to being in charge of a classroom, however, there are some where the teacher is put into a teaching situation immediately and then is supported in a “sink or swim” type of situation.

Schoon and Sandoval (2000) researched one of these alternative-teaching options. Their student-teaching requirement diverted from that of a traditional program because they were responsible for teaching on their own after only completing coursework. Where a traditional program generally requires pre-service teacher candidates to have various interning experiences and a well-supervised student teaching experience, this program was more about learning on the job. The teachers had immediate feedback as to what was and was not effective. During their time teaching, they had twice weekly university mentor contact as well as having afternoon classes that taught pedagogical content. They found that most of the teachers that entered the program were able to be successful and remain in the classroom beyond the typical time that teachers last in urban schools. The teacher candidates praised the classes where they were able to reflect upon what they were doing in the classrooms in real time and found it to be a rich learning experience.

Most teachers regard their student-teaching experience to be one of the most important experiences that they have in their training. Though there are differences between those experiences, the salience is key.

**Recommendations for Programs and Research**

There are many more questions within the field of teacher preparation that need to be responded to in the area that this capstone has explored. There are general student-teaching problems with the relationship between universities and the schools that host student teachers. Often, the placement of student teachers is not a highly regarded position within the academy, and cooperating teachers and university professors are significantly disconnected from one another (Zeichner, 2002). Especially when one is considering placement for student teachers in urban schools or environments, there seems to be a congruity that is potentially missing between the philosophy of the university, that of the school, that of the student teacher, and that of the cooperating teacher. While these incompatibilities exist, it seems no wonder that student teachers are exiting programs without a good idea of how they will be successful outside of the relative safety of student teaching. While some universities use “lab schools” to do research, an interesting research topic would be whether student teachers are more successful working at a school where there is compatibility between the university and the placement, or if this could stunt the teacher’s development of their own identity when they leave the safety of this compatibility.

Also, though there has been research into the area of training for diversity (Milner, 2010; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 2002) it could be an especially important route to further delve into what experiences are positive for pre-service teachers to learn about diversity. It seems that even when pre-service teachers have positive learning experiences with students of color, overarching issues of inequities may still persist. It is as though the one group as been demystified, but the macrosystem’s issues that the students deal with are not acknowledged or recognized. Additionally, sometimes the pre-service teachers actually have their stereotypes reinforced. When pre-service teachers are placed into an urban environment, often they view situations through the lenses that they are pre-conditioned to use when working with minority or high-poverty students (Sleeter, 2001, p. 100). In this way, simply the act of being in the presence of diversity is insufficient to redefine the way that student teachers actually think.

Perhaps part of the solution of the quandary of training good urban teachers lies not only in the training but also in the disposition of the teacher. For example, a teacher candidate may have an excellent working definition of what culturally relevant pedagogy is and what it entails. Perhaps this candidate knows all about Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences, and that the setting of high expectations for students is key to their success. The ability to bridge the gap between what is learned and what is done may be the most salient link in the process. Down the road, this teacher may wind up in a situation teaching from a heavily scripted curriculum to students representing multiple backgrounds, ethnicities, and ability levels. The teacher may know on an intellectual level about the various factors that contribute to the students’ successes, but on a practical level implementing these things may potentially be two entirely separate entities.

It is my contention that it is the responsibility of teacher educators to instill certain dispositions within teacher candidates in order to mold them. The line between what teacher qualities are moldable and which are innate has been and continues to be blurred. But when we see teacher candidates complete fieldwork within schools that are considered urban, research shows that these teachers are able to obtain certain dispositions that all them to debunk stereotypes, rid themselves of biases, and obtain a greater understanding of the cultural aspects of students’ daily lives (Sleeter, 2002). These facts cannot be discounted.

There are also many alternative teacher certification programs that have become popular in recent years. These programs pride themselves on finding teachers that are not the typical young, white females that tend to populate traditional undergraduate teacher education programs. Often, they boast a different schedule than traditional programs and include second-career teachers and more minorities. Many of these teachers remain in the field and work effectively far past what can be expected out of other programs (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

It is, however, important to note that the recommendations given, while geared toward education specifically for urban spaces, are not solely relegated to the groups of teachers that go into a program knowing that they want to teach in this type of school. Many teachers do not know what type of school they will be hired in or where their niche may be discovered. Therefore my aim here is to put forth recommendations that would benefit all teacher candidates so that they can be successful in whatever environment they find themselves in.

Dr. Haberman, said “education is a matter of life and death for urban children” (Haberman, 1991). This is not a statement that can be taken lightly, and it is one that is not without merit. It was my own personal experience that I did not set out to be an “urban teacher” rather I would have taken a job where it was offered to me. My experience is not different than that of my coworkers, we did not say to ourselves, “I want to teach in an urban school” but when it happened, we adapted at various rates and to varying degrees. I agree with Milner’s idea that all teacher candidates need to be trained in how to navigate their own positionalities in order to be able to prepare teachers for the challenges that they will face in the classroom. However, Haberman’s ideology about the innate characteristics may also hold some merit. What are teacher education programs supposed to do in order to navigate the varying viewpoints? I believe that there is a continuum, that teacher candidates do not all come in on one polarized side (born) or the other (made) and that professional educators can create educational experiences that can bridge the gaps.

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