A Critical Look at Four Multicultural Reform Efforts in One Urban College of Education

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that each instantiation of a critical pedagogical approach is also unique, co-constructed, and situated in local events and knowledge, which for children and urban schools persists and may be reinforced by mentor teachers.

What follows are descriptions of the four projects, which were analyzed using the frame of the four interrelated dimensions of a critical perspective suggested by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2009). In each project, we describe the goals, report relevant data, and provide an analysis using either a priori or emerging themes (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, pp. 117-118).

The first project, which analyzes responses to placement in urban schools, crystallizes our overarching concern as urban educators and the projects presented here.

Project #1: The Realities of the Field Experience: What Prospective Teachers Are Saying about Urban Field Experiences

by Sasnolle Thomas-Alexander

The first project investigated pre-service teachers’ evaluations of field placements in urban and suburban settings. Numerical ratings and written comments on exit questionnaires and other written correspondences were compared and contrasted. Data for this project was systematically collected from an on-line survey, the Intern Evaluation Mentor Teacher Survey, given during the 2009-2009 school year. Interns’ perceptions of their field experience’s ability to prepare them for a career in education were measured using a Likert scale (Yauko & Moss, 2008). The sample included 273 (56 male and 217 female) pre-service interns. One hundred and eighty of respondents identified their race as White.

Student teachers accounted for 60.1% of the sample, practicum interns, 38.3%, and 2.9% were methods interns. Additional data were collected through written correspondence with interns.

Emerging Themes

After analyzing the results, it was concluded there were no statistically significant differences between interns’ positive ratings of experiences in urban and suburban placement sites. However, interns’ negative comments concerning urban placements contradicted the favorable numerical ratings concerning their experiences in classrooms. From the interns’ comments, three overarching themes emerged.

Urban placements are undesirable. Although students are required to complete a major field experience in an urban setting, some perceived the urban placement as punishment for attending a university in an urban setting. A typical student response was, “I don’t want to go to school just because we go to college in [the city] we must get used to teaching in the [school setting].”

Roleing entitled to suburban placements. Interns believe they are entitled to receive a suburban placement for one of their experiences in the urban setting. “Even though I requested to do student teaching in a suburb. I was about one day from being placed at an urban high school...again. I stopped it just in time.”

Although interns in the literature consistently report being inadequately prepared to teach in urban schools (Dana, 1992; Ladd-Rowland, 2000), interns in this college expressed dissatisfaction about not being prepared for suburban settings. One wrote,

I am not applying to ANY urban schools for employment. I am not interested in working in one and do not feel that placement would be best for me. Pretty sure I will go to [this university] did not help me prepare for the setting I want to be in.

Although the university’s policy states that placements must be in an urban setting, there is no mention of guaranteeing students’ suburban placements. One student summarized the thoughts of many:

I feel the Office of Field Service did not try as hard as they could to find me an urban setting for my student teaching. I therefore was FORCED to spend BOTH of my teaching experiences (urban and student teaching) in a [city] school...my placementAgency did not place me in my choice of urban school. I do not appreciate that other interns were allowed a more enjoyable and profitable experience.

Intern bias. One student wrote,

My parents and I drove past the school and none of us felt comfortable with the school and the area it is in. The parking area had a low fence with no apparent security. The neighborhood did not look very safe. My parents are concerned for both my personal safety and the safety of my vehicle to this school.

Another intern argued that since she was not from Ohio, she trusted her church members when they warned her not to risk her life in such a bad area. Though she had requested the site on her application, she later wrote, “I did not request to go to the ghettoes of [the city].”

Sometimes intern concerns were about race. One intern worried about serving in urban settings, as in this request for a placement change, “I don’t want to teach Black
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We were told that our cat had fleas. I had never seen a flea in our place, ever. But once you had the Boreda down, then sud- denly, every now and then, you could see fleas hopping…

—Edward, Faculty Member

The urban college of education where we teach has a strong mission statement that is concerned with diversity. In 2007 a group of education faculty formed a diversi- ty self-study group that engaged discussion around diversity issues as they occurred in our lives, our teaching, our research, and at our college. What was found is that these discussions were disconnected from the everyday issues taken by this group were similar to put- ting Borax on a cat with fleas. We quickly discovered that the ideas and classes were ever-present but invisible, ignored, and/or denied. All of the initiatives created through this self-study group opened up space for discussion and we were able to identify what we called trailblazers in the effort to reflectively advocate for the needs of students and issues through collaborations within the college.

This analysis encompassed four dif- ferent projects that were implemented as reform initiatives at the college. Our collaborative work and this subsequent analysis have drawn on insights from Co- chran-Smith (2004) who describes teacher education as both a “learning problem and a political problem” (p. 1) that involves the creation of inquiry communities. Grounded in a critical perspective, our work and the projects described in this paper involved criti- cal sociocultural theory (Lewin, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), critical race theory (Lad- sin-Billings & Tate, 2008), and a critical literacy perspective (Shannon, 1990).

Following the descriptions of the indi- vidual projects below, we jointly analyze the projects through a lens created by four dimensions critical perspective (Lewis- son, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006). This analysis offers “what the dialectic (p. 3) by generating both theory and practice from local knowl- edge that advances our college’s mission relating to diversity.

The four projects in question are:

1. Analyses of student responses from an analysis of their placements in urban schools;
2. Lessons learned from discussions of the faculty diversity self-study group;
3. Teaching and learning issues relat- ed to culturally responsive peda- gogy in an early childhood methods class; and
4. Teaching and learning issues relat- ed to multicultural literacy in professional development sessions conducted at a local elementary school.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Pedagogy

Critical perspectives on pedagogy examine many ways that unequal rela- tions of power and privilege are entwined through interactions of teachers, parents, in-service educators, children, teacher educators, and pre- and in-service educators in school contexts and beyond (Apple, 2010). This requires a criti- cal examination of perspectives and ideolo- gies, both invisible and visible, frequently identified as “natural” (Anderson, 1998; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). The role of the teacher/researcher is to “connect the dots” (Tatum, 2007, p. 39 ff) by exploring the integration of outside forces at play in everyday interactions as well as the agency of participants on the inside to affect change (Moje & Lewis, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007).

Equally relevant to critical pedagogical perspectives is the practice of self-reflec- tion that is engaged by all participants. Children, pre- and in-service teachers, and teachers/researchers should interrogate their histories, practices, and beliefs as well as those of others (Lewison & Woodrum, 1996, Rogers, 2003). Such self-reflection is co-constructed and provides a basis for deeper learning, the introduction of previ- ously-silenced voices, and the opportunity to extend beyond the personal in order to take action in pedagogical and political realms, thus moving toward social justice (Kubota, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Rich, 1992).

This movement is not linear or pre- scribed but is an unfinished and emergent process (Luke, 2004; Nieto, 1999), suggesting that such instantiation of a critical pedagogi- cal approach is also unique, co-constructed, and situated in local events and knowledge, which children and urban schools possess and may be reinforced by mentor teachers.

What follows are descriptions of the four projects, which were analyzed using the frame of the four interrelated dimen- sions of critical perspective suggested by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002). In each project, we describe the goals, report relevant data, and provide an analysis using either a priori or emerging themes (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, pp. 117-118).

The first project, which was analyzed using written responses to placement in urban schools, crystallizes our overarching con- cerns and serves as the bedrock for the other projects presented here.

Project #1: The Realities of the Field Experience: What Prospective Teachers Are Saying about Urban Field Experiences

by Sashelle Thomas-Alexander

The first project investigated pre- service teachers’ evaluations of field place- ments in urban and suburban settings. Numerical ratings and written comments on exit questionnaires and other written correspondences were compared and con- trasted. Data for this project was collect- ed from an on-line survey, the Internal Evaluation Mentor Teacher Survey, given during the 2008-2009 school year.

Interns’ perceptions of their field experience’s ability to prepare them for a career in education were measured using a Likert scale (Yauko & Moss, 2008). The sample included 273 (56 male and 217 female) pre-service interns. One of the respondents identified their race as White. Student teachers accounted for 60.1% of the sample; practicum interns, 38.3%; and 2.9% were methods interns. Additional data were collected through written cor- respondence with interns.

Emerging Themes

After analyzing the results, it was concluded there were no statistically significant differences between interns’ positive ratings of experiences in urban and sub- urban placement sites. However, interns’ negative comments concerning urban place- ments contradicted the favorable numerical ratings concerning their experiences in classrooms. From the interns’ comments, three overarching themes emerged.

Urban placements are undesirable. Although students are required to complete a major field experience in an urban set- ting, some perceived the urban placement as punishment for attending a university in an urban setting. A typical student response to this question was “I would rather just because we go to college in [the city] means we get stuck teaching in the [city].”

Racially based orientations. Interns believe they are entitled to receive a suburban placement for one of their experi- ences. Even though I requested to do student teaching in a suburb...I was about one day from being placed...again. I stopped it just in time.

Although interns in the literature consistently report being inadequately pre- pared to teach in urban schools (Dana, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2000), interns in this college expressed disdain about not being prepared for suburban settings. One wrote,

I am not applying to ANY urban schools for employment. I am not interested in working in one and do not feel that placement would be best for me. If that is the case, I will not attend this [university] did not help me prepare for the setting I want to be in.

Although the university’s policy states that field experiences must be urban, there must be an urban setting, there is no mention of guaranteeing students’ suburban placements, and the student summarized the thoughts of many:

I feel the Office of Field Service did not try as hard as they could to find me a non urban setting for my student teaching. I therefore was FORCED to spend BOTH of my teaching experiences [pre and student teaching] in a [city] school. My parents are concerned for my safety, my teaching experiences (practicum and student teaching) in a [city] school…My parents and I do not want to take any risks. I do not appreciate that other interns were allowed a more enjoyable and profitable experience.

Intern bias.

My parents and I drove past the school and none of us felt comfortable with the school and the area it is in. The parking area has a low fence with no apparent security. The neighborhood did not look very safe. My parents are concerned for both my personal safety and the safety of my vehicle at this school.

Another intern argued that since she was not from Ohio, she trusted her church members when they warned her not to risk her life in such a bad area. Though she had requested the site on her application, she later wrote, “I did not request I request to go to the ghetto of [the city].”

Sometimes intern concerns were about racial mismatch between the intern and the students, as in this request for a place- ment change, “I don’t want to teach Black
A Priori Themes

The self-study group, designed to disrupt the commonplace, examined members’ practices by challenging views and bringing about new lenses to analyze. Participants identified a gap between the college’s urban mission and faculty’s urban practices. The committee initiated a discussion of the urban mission in the college and department meetings, conducted a self-study group, and generated definitions of intern concerns often lead to the policy of responding to student concerns. In summary, the most encouraging finding for this project is that overwhelmingly interns’ on-line evaluations indicate concern. Research provides evidence that working with culturally diverse groups can positively impact students. They commented on students’ learning of diversity followed differing trajectories, acknowledging that students should be respected for where they are in the trajectory.

Discussion:

Four Projects Related

The analysis offered in this article

Children’s Expectations of Diversity Followed Differing Trajectories. An Action Research Project by Dinah Volk

This project investigated whether a kidwatching assignment would facilitate students’ ability to practice culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). There were 49 urban education students, however, using the concept of “visibility” (Gere, Buehler, & Hallavar, 2009), to make children’s strengths visible and valued;

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The self-study group, designed to disrupt the commonplace, examined members’ practices by challenging views and bringing about new lenses to analyze. Participants identified a gap between the college’s urban mission and faculty’s urban practices, despite the college’s urban mission and department meetings, conducted a project investigating the commonplace. Theses themes are drawn from the commonplace views and giving many the skills and confidence to see children in new ways. The comments of Edie, who was White, were typical. I think this is such an amazing, amazing opportunity to really take a different kid in a completely different way And To see them for the people that they are.

African American, African, 24, and one Jordanian American. Students completed 20 hours in a classroom with one assignment involving kidwatching. The definition of kidwatching was expanded to “taking note of what [children] know and can do in school, at home, and in community settings,” attempting to understand what aspects of children’s situation they were “pressing knowledge” alone and with others, in all three settings, and “using what [we] learn to share with others.”

Exhibiting Emerging Themes

The analysis offered in this article

Discussion: Four Projects Related to the Concept of Kidwatching

We found an instance of disrupting the commonplace: one team read Grandfather’s Journey by Allen Say to a class of special education children. Students identified with the main character who was not an everyday notion that a person could move from one country to another and year to year in both places. This experience is far from commonplace in the lives of mainstream U.S. children, especially these special education students.

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The particular texts presented generative themes leading to dialogue designed to disrupt the commonplace. An example of the status quo is this encounter in a student in an initial professional development session: “I don’t think I would incorporate books like This side of Woodrow, so that the story of the interaction between a White girl and an African-American girl over a fence separating their yards. This book brought to light that their first and second graders ‘loved each other’ and they did not want to disrupt their students’ perceptions.

Analyzing the teacher action research projects, we found an instance of disrupting the commonplace: one team read Grandfather’s Journey by Allen Say to a class of special education children. Students identified with the main character who was not an everyday notion that a person could move from one country to another and year to year in both places. This experience is far from commonplace in the lives of mainstream U.S. children, especially these special education students.

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We also noted that in both the Exploring Diversity and the Kidwatching projects African Americans and White students commented on the racism and classism that people of color, working class, and poor people live with (Daily, 2010).

In the self-study group it was acceptable for there to be multiple perspectives. However, when the study group members ventured out to respective department meetings to discuss issues of race and class, some colleagues felt uncomfortable about the topics, others criticized colleagues—sometimes harshly, and still others felt silent.

As the self study group was a safe space to talk frankly, the classroom in which the Kidwatching project and the professional development classrooms in the Nurturing Critical Literacy project were places where culturally responsive teaching could also be openly explored. In the former, both the instructor and students were able to bring their multiple perspectives into the classroom and, in the latter, perspectives were voiced in two of the five teacher action research projects. In both classrooms, commentaries, and pedagogical issues of encouraging voices of all students was central.

Focusing on the Sociopolitical

In all of the projects there were a few participants who focused on the sociopolitical. The realities of the Field Experience project examined the perspectives of teachers who were part of an urban sociopolitical system. In the self-study group, the “our cat has fleas” metaphor was used to identify the diversity of coming together and caring for one another. In the Nurturing Critical Literacy project, one of the teacher action research projects focusing on the sociopolitical involved increasing opportunities for subordinate groups so they could participate in school to gain in a participatory teaching practice, where the over-arching goal was for the participants, pre-service and in-service teachers, to become more aware of their pre-existing power and its impact on their practices in relation to cultural issues.

Considering Multiple Viewpoints

In the Realities of the Field Experience project the quantitative analysis of student and teacher power was high and the Likert scale showed equally positive evaluations of urban and suburban classroom experiences. In contrast, the qualitative analysis of students’ written comments was overwhelmingly negative concerning urban placements. We suspect that the relative lack of comments were primarily due to how they felt about the urban place. We discovered this because of a growing realization that deliberate attempts were needed to expose mainstream students to underscored student experiences, urban field experiences, and professional development efforts in an urban setting. Next we look across the four projects using the magnifying glass provided by these four critical dimensions.

Disrupting the Commonplace

Considered first in this study was the Realities of the Field Experience project because it clearly articulated the need for the overall study’s goal: honest dialogue leading to a deepened and broadened view of the fore the gap between the stated mis-

volved in these two projects was about the college as a whole. One common

were reviewed. The group discussed concerns

are issues that emerged when commonplace views of 

(examined discussion topics in a safe space.

versity

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implications for practice are pro-

impressed to have critical and ongoing analyses spanning across teacher education programs that can be mined for insights into challenges and thus create action plans and directions for deep-seated change that will go beyond the mere “tweaking” of crisis-appearance programs. It is important to appreciate and help students understand the aim of culturally responsive teaching, and critical pedagogy, among other innova-

tive approaches, with the goal of ultimately improving the academic achievement of all children, particularly those from poor and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. However, more critical perspective which does not contribute to the transformation of chil-

dren’s perspectives is needed for real change to happen. We need more work as well. We asked for our perspectives and teacher educators to keep track of our professional learning efforts in an urban setting. We believe it is important to invite the students and faculty to talk openly about the strengths and life ex- 

The color


Dっきり, B. (1992). Towards preparing the mono-


Long, S., & Vilk, D. (2010). Networks of support: Lessons from the other teachers in chil-

dren’s lives. In M. L. Dantzig & P. C. Manayk (Eds.), Teachers and teacher educators in relation to multicultural education: Learning from and with culturally and linguistically diverse families (pp. 177-200). New York: Routledge.

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.


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We also noted that in both the Exploring Diversity and the Kidwatching projects African Americans and White students had different experiences and perspectives. The African Americans often brought their personal reflections to a critical sociopo- litical awareness. We focused on the feelings the prospectiveteachers had about urban settings, but further investigation is needed to understand the feelings students had about their classroom field experiences, and professional development efforts in an urban setting. Next we look across our self-study group using the magnifying glass provided by these four critical dimensions.


disrupting the commonplace

Considered first in this study was the Realities of the Field Experience project because it clearly articulated the need for the overall study’s goal: honest dialogue leading to healthy action. By bringing to the forefront the need for multiple perspectives is one way to disrupt the commonplace views that might disrupt the commonplace, interro- gating multiple viewpoints, focus explicitly on the sociopolitical, and take action.


tasking action

The Realities of the Field Experience project shows the need for action depend- ing on the expanded understandings and perspectives that emerged in three dimensions of a critical pedagogy. The self- study group, whose views were described in the Exploring Diversity project, began by exploring personal teaching practices. This group has become action-oriented, venturing out to respective department meetings to discuss issues of racism and in the overall study’s goal: honest dialogue with genuine collaboration and the backing of colleagues, it becomes more possible to enact dramatic changes that could make safe spaces a condition for challeng- ing the racism and classism that people feel color, working class, and poor people live.


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