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What Works in Race-Conscious Teacher Education? Reflections from Educators in the Field

By Kerri Ullucci

Introduction and Purpose

David is a White teacher at an urban school in Los Angeles. He grew up in rural Oregon in an almost entirely White community. As an adult, he specifically wanted to work in racially diverse schools. During a classroom visit, I watched as his students investigated music as a way of understanding how marginalized groups counter their oppression. They discussed gospel and rap. He made vivid connections between the lyrics and slavery and Biblical passages. This complex conversation dazzled his students. Their interest was palpable.

Two hours away in the California desert, Mona, a White woman, teaches middle school English in a majority Latino school. During class, her thirteen years olds chant out the alphabet. “B says /buh/, /buh/,” says Mona. The class responds. Over and over they mimic her lead. The children are timed—when the buzzer rings, they switch to a new sound. This goes on for an hour. She explains to me that this is all they can do. Their parents don’t value education. They just need the basics. Mona thinks this approach works best for *these* students. It is all they can handle.

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In South Los Angeles, Ms. Holden yells down the

hallway at two Mexican second graders. She admonishes them for running; she says they look like criminals. One child, who is learning English and can't understand what was said, asks his classmate in Spanish to translate. "No Spanish in school!" shouts the teacher. "Learn to speak English! You'll be picking in the fields forever if you don't!"

Over the years I have spent as a teacher and as a teacher educator, I have been collecting stories. These stories are similar in that the main character is White and the plot is about ethnicity. The stories are different in the protagonist's understanding of how race and racism operate in schools. These stories provide a jumping off point for the questions that shape this research.

This is a study about how schools of education impact their students' ability to be successful in urban schools. What experiences—if any—in teacher education programs shape the development of race-conscious White teachers? To address my goal, I conducted a qualitative study of six teachers currently employed in urban schools.¹ All were considered excellent White teachers of children of color. Through a series of interviews, I explored the ways race, culture, and diversity were addressed in their teacher education programs and whether the experiences were meaningful. In this study, I define *race conscious* as the opposite of *colorblind*. I see race consciousness as occurring along three dimensions: (1) teachers understand that racism impacts schools; (2) they acknowledge and draw on the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students; and (3) they understand the value of culturally relevant pedagogies. This is akin to Teel and Obidah's (2008) definition of culturally competent teachers as understanding personal and societal racism and having the ability to apply these understandings to teaching and learning processes. I chose specifically to focus on White teachers since they are the majority of school teachers. As of 2004, White teachers make up 83% of the teaching force in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

As K-12 student bodies continue to diversify, teacher education programs have addressed this need through a variety of interventions. Typical approaches have included fieldwork, stand-alone courses, and community projects that include issues of race and diversity. But do they matter? What experiences stick with teachers once they are out in the field? Much of the research on preparing White teachers for diverse contexts focuses primarily on the short term and in university settings. Studies provide information on the immediate changes (or lack thereof) the treatment had on the participants. In most cases, students participate in a field experience or take a course, and then are followed up via survey or interview. However, little has been written about the effects of multicultural courses over the long term. I wanted to fill this gap by working with teachers in the field, after they completed their programs. I wanted to capture their reflections on which components of their teacher education programs were most meaningful to them in raising their racial consciousness.

Assumptions and Theoretical Frameworks

This study rests on the assumption that multicultural education and racially conscious teachers benefit children of color. Gay and Kirkland (2003) state that “multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected” (p. 181). While called many things—including *culturally relevant*, *culturally responsive*, and *culturally congruent*—the assumption that teachers who understand the role of race, culture, and/or their own Whiteness in schooling are a benefit to their students is supported by many key scholars in the field (Gay, 1994; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1998; Tatum, 1994). I also assume that being White is not an automatic indicator of ineffectiveness in a multiracial classroom (see Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers of all races have the potential to be successful, and unsuccessful, with children of color. Cooper (2002) synthesizes a variety of research suggesting White teachers can be effective with children of color. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999, p.704) suggests that “not all culturally relevant teachers are African American, and not all African American teachers hold culturally relevant views towards their professions.” Indeed, Ladson-Billings’ work (1994) shows the effectiveness of several White teachers who educate students of color.

However, the literature also tells us that many White teachers hold deficit views of children of color, prefer not to teach in urban schools, and feel underprepared to work with children of diverse backgrounds (Marx, 2004; Schultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1996; Van Hook, 2002; Zeichner, 1996). They may not see themselves as racialized beings (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004) and try not to acknowledge race by the use of colorblind language (Marx, 2006). Some understand multicultural education as a largely technical enterprise, which requires them to use multicultural literature, accommodate different learning styles, or include international holidays (Weisman & Garza, 2002). Thus, while not precluded from being effective teachers of children of color, White teachers often struggle with an array of normative issues that can impact their success in diverse classrooms.

Moreover, despite being a hot button issue, schools of education struggle with how to prepare preservice teachers for diverse student populations. While research shows “that a fundamental characteristic of effective teachers of low-income students of color is respect for, knowledge of, and relationship with the home communities,” most teacher education programs do not include meaningful experiences with children of color (Shinew & Sodoroff, 2003, p. 24). Ninety percent of teacher education programs in the United States continue to follow approaches that are not focused on teaching in a pluralistic society (Cross, 2003). Traditional teacher educational programs make changes in the name of multiculturalism that are often halfhearted and insignificant (Pattnaik & Battle-Vold, 1998). While I understand at times this superficial treatment is impacted by forces beyond the university (for example, a state department of education does not believe multicultural education to be an important issue), Nieto argues that teacher education was and remains ambivalent about diversity issues due to “the nature of the population served by

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teacher education programs, [and] the assimilationist ideology undergirding these programs” (2000, p. 181). Moreover, less than 5% of teacher educators worked in urban schools, leaving a “real question as to whether the expertise needed to address the preparation of teachers for diversity is currently found in the faculty who staff our teacher education programs” (Zeichner, 1996, p. 138).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a theoretical foundation for my methodology. With roots in legal scholarship and the Civil Rights movement, CRT grew out of a “a deep dissatisfaction with liberal legal ideology generally, and with contemporary civil rights thinking about race and racism in particular” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). Spearheaded by Derrick Bell in the 1980s, CRT exposes colorblind and race-neutral policies as oppression in new forms. It also questions the liberal notions of merit and equality which refuse to take racism into account. Rather than conceiving of racism as random acts by individuals, CRT foregrounds racism as a systemic and central feature in American life (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tate, 1997). CRT seeks to “make plain the racialized contexts of public and private spheres in our society” (Ladson-Billings, p. 10).

Critical race theory consists of many overlapping components. Three are particularly critical to the study of education. They include the central role of race in everyday life, the importance of experiential knowledge and storytelling, and a challenge to traditional discourses on race (Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002). By using a CRT approach, I position race as a salient feature in the daily life of schools. Thus, when I first began working with teachers, I focused squarely and unapologetically on the fact that schools are nonneutral sites that are impacted by the same racism as the greater community. Questions posed asked *how* race impacted life in schools, rather than *if* it did. As my participants were considered particularly race conscious by their peers (this selection process is discussed at length below), I wanted to know how/if their schooling helped them break with more dominant narratives about colorblindness. Storytelling played a key role in my methodology. I asked teachers to capture light-bulb moments, to tell stories about when they “got” some dimension of bias that they had not seen before. In many ways, this is an unusual endeavor. White teachers don’t often talk about racism. They certainly don’t talk about their consciousness development or how messages from schools of education impact their teaching practice vis-à-vis racism. To use CRT also required that I push against colorblindness, and challenge myself to resist non-critical reads of Whiteness and privilege. CRT anchored my inclusion of storytelling and provided space for these untraditional narratives about race.

The Interviews: Participant Selection and Methods

For this study, I conducted interviews with six elementary school teachers who were currently working in two urban schools. Students of color made up more than 90% of the student bodies at both schools; Latino students represented the vast majority at 75%. Additionally, both schools were situated in low-income communities.

I solicited nominees from a variety of administrators and support personnel at the two schools sites I studied. These included principals, vice principals, special education coordinators, and literacy coaches. The majority were people of color. I selected these nominators because they had access to teachers when they were teaching. That is to say, these nominators saw teachers in action and had a frame of reference that they could use in making nominations. In order to lend structure to the nominating process, I provided each nominator with a document I created called "Indicators of Effective Teachers of Children of Color." In this document I included indicators of high-quality teaching for children of color as determined by key scholars in the field (Cooper, 2002; Gay, 2002; Grant et al., 1986; Jordan Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; McIntosh, 1989; Nieto, 1996). These indicators included maintaining high expectations of all children, diversifying the curriculum and understanding the social-cultural dimensions of teaching.

Based on these parameters, I sought nominations for excellent teachers of children of color—the best of the best at their school sites. Additionally, I utilized an academic indicator—in all cases, a K-12 standardized test given at the district or state level. I asked each teacher to share his or her students' most recent test scores or district benchmarks. While I do not believe a teacher's impact can be adequately measured by testing, I do understand that the political climate has distilled good teaching down to a single metric. In order to be able to speak to both pro- and anti-testing audiences I selected teachers who both had students who performed well on standardized tests and were highly recommended by their peers. Fortunately, there was 100% agreement between these two criteria; every single teacher selected through community nominations also had students with high test scores.

Once selected, each teacher participated in three to four interviews. Each lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. I interviewed all my participants individually. The three primary interviews all utilized interview protocols. When a fourth interview occurred, it was to debrief points that participants brought up previously rather than to explore new ground. I asked teachers about courses, fieldwork, and special projects designed to address race and racism in their teacher education programs. I asked them to tell stories where they could. I wanted to know how they believed their teacher education program impacted their own racial consciousness and the ways in which they educated children. To ascertain impact, I asked the participants questions about what mattered most to them in their programs and what knowledge and skills they used in the classroom currently. Clearly, "impact" in this context was based on perceptions. Teachers relayed how they believed teacher education shaped them. This study relied squarely on what my participants remembered and thought to be important. I took teachers at their word. The goals and intentions of individual teacher education programs were not taken into account for this study. It is also important to note that the teachers attended different schools of education in several states; this research was not an evaluation of a single university's program.

I taped all interviews using a digital voice recorder. They tapes were then

transcribed and analyzed. Using Maxwell's (1996) approach to categorizing data, I began coding by looking for common features between interviews. I grouped responses into two main categories: those pertaining to university courses and those pertaining to fieldwork and practicum experiences. Further categories emerged, which fractured each category into particular subgroups. For example, within the *university courses* category, teachers repeatedly referenced particular books and movies as well as more conceptual understandings that impacted their practice. Throughout the data collection period and the analysis phase, I also wrote memos to capture context, conundrums and areas for further exploration. These memos provided initial steps in the analytic process as well.

Researcher's Role Management and Positionality

To deny subjectivity as a researcher is clearly disingenuous. As a White woman who studies race, I strive to be particularly mindful of the biases, understandings, and limitations I bring to this work. This is a challenge. Discerning your own bias is a bit like looking at the Northern Lights. Straight on, they are hard to see. It is only now and again—and often when pointed out to you—that you see them from the corner of your eye. We live our biases often in unexamined and invisible ways. I reflected and questioned and struggled with how best to be authentic in this work. I enlisted the help of critical friends—an African American female researcher and an African American male scholar—who helped check my assumptions at the design and analysis phases.

I know best my own experience—that of a marginally middle-class, Italian woman who grew up in New England. Big, diverse cities also have shaped my life; I called Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles home for over 10 years. Perhaps the largest influence on my research is the fact that I too was an urban school teacher. I am an “insider” in K-6 schools. As a White woman who taught in urban public settings, I had much in common with the teachers I worked with in the field. My challenge then was to make the familiar strange (Erickson, 1984). I took the time to ask follow-up questions, rather than stick to my interview protocol, when I felt my own lens start to shade the discussion. For example, Peter used the term *colorblind* once as a goal for himself. This immediately raised red flags. I felt my study slowly unraveling—did I have the wrong participant? My belief in the centrality of racism—a CRT tenet—forced me to push against this term. I stopped and pressed Peter as to what he meant by colorblindness. He plainly explained to me that in his class, he was keen to break arbitrary expectations. His children knew they were Black or Latino. They didn't need him to tell them. Society had made it crystal clear where they “belonged” in the racial hierarchy. In his class, he would be thoughtful about rupturing such messages. My ears heard colorblind. His intent was color-conscious. This was an important moment for me. Academics tend to hyperanalyze, to focus on the minute. While this is an important skill, we can lose and/or mar part of the message along the way.

A Closer Look at Participants

To begin the analysis, Table 1 outlines my participants' credentials and how long they had been in the classroom. All of the participants had both their credentials and their masters' degrees. Moreover, all of them received their degrees from public universities.

I then move into my participants' feedback. In regards to course experiences, the data is grouped to focus on the meaningful readings, activities, and concepts that they still remembered and used in their current practice. In regards to fieldwork, teachers shared the beneficial experiences and lessons they learned by actually working in schools and communities.

Teacher Education Components: Lessons Learned from Courses

A first category to emerge focused on courses. The range of course experiences was immense. Some teachers, like Justine, Peter, and Jessica, took several race- and/or language-focused courses. Kate took one. These included courses such as multicultural education, bilingual methods, and English as a second language. Others, like Grace and Gloria, didn't take any race-focused courses, although they took a course apiece that tangentially included race. Of course, some of this vari-

Table 1
Overview of Teacher Preparation/Experience

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Type of Credential</i>	<i>Undergrad University Location</i>	<i>Type of Masters</i>	<i>Number of Years as a Teacher</i>
Peter	Elementary	California	Multicultural Education	34-35 years
Gloria	Special Educ., particularly for visually impaired students	Pennsylvania	Special Education	20 years
Kate	Elementary	Rhode Island	Arts in Teaching	2 years, plus some substituting
Grace	Elementary	Massachusetts	Reading Specialist	6 years
Justine	Elementary BCLAD (for bilingual teachers)	California	Multicultural Education	10 years
Jessica	Elementary	California	Education	3 years

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ability can be accounted for by the differences in ages of my participants. Some completed their programs before multiculturalism was on many university agendas. However, most of the teachers received their credentials in the recent past, and all but Gloria received their masters within the past 10 years. What is critical to note is the lack of attention to diversity overall. Two of the teachers do not remember taking *any* course that pertained specifically to multicultural development. This finding speaks to the inconsistency in which universities have, over the years, addressed these issues with preservice teachers.

For those teachers with more extensive coursework, I asked them which readings, activities, and concepts were most meaningful from the courses they took. Several teachers referenced particular books that made an impression. "Something that I always keep with me is we read a book that's called *Their Highest Potential*," reported Jessica. She explained how it helped her understand the role of high expectations. Kate remembered reading several stories that chronicled teaching in urban settings. "You know one of the books was *Savage Inequalities*," she replied. "You know what book I'm talking about, Kozol's book? I remember really enjoying reading it." Jessica also remembered reading a research study on language usage in communities of color. She could not remember the title, but said it focused on the language usage in Hawaiian, White, and African American households. To her, this research was meaningful because it showed how White children begin school with certain inherent advantages:

Kids are much more able to fit into classroom structure because they already know question-answer [format of] dialogue and they've already been prompted to speak; whereas other cultures, it's like you don't speak unless you're spoken to and you don't really shout out and you don't express your ideas until somebody wants to know them. So that stayed with me; how just even a home language structure makes them either be ready or not for school.

Jessica also referenced a second novel that she found compelling. She read a book called *Our America* about two African American boys growing up on the South Side of Chicago. The book is tangentially about education; it is more focused on the realities of growing up in an urban housing development and the violence that surrounded the boys. She remembered the book being eye-opening. Peter recalled reading *A Hundred Years of Solitude* and parts of *Like Water for Chocolate*. He recalled having class discussions on these novels. Grace also mentioned the power of reading stories about urban schools and the students who attended them.

It is interesting to note that all of the readings are either novels (like *Like Water for Chocolate*) or read like narratives and are story heavy (like *Our America*). None of the books referenced by any of the teachers are methods books or texts; they did not recall a particularly good science strategies guide or a textbook on how to teach reading. I believe this speaks to the power of stories as a teaching tool. Stories build empathy. Stories provide other realities (Bergerson, 2003). Applying

CRT tenets again, this finding is not that surprising. In all of these examples, my participants gained insights into diverse communities in ways that they may not be able to in their own lives. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) explain the notion of *counterstorytelling* as the sharing of stories from those on the margins, with the goal of challenging, exposing and analyzing majoritarian stories that help maintain racial privilege. Each of the books cited above provided a narrative that would be novel to many White teachers' lived experiences. In this vein, I believe these stories provide critical insights to teachers into how race and culture play out in everyday ways, ways they may not have previously recognized.

I also asked teachers to think about in-class experiences or activities that were particularly enduring, that helped them think differently about race and/or language ability. Here, I wanted them to think about the ways professors meaningfully approached topics around diversity. Teachers recounted a wide array of activities they remembered, including video, simulations and particularly memorable lectures. Justine recounted a video-based experience:

I remember a film that we saw about a Laotian community in Seattle and the struggles and everything that they go through... I thought that was cool and it made me go to Laos subsequently. Just exposing us to other immigrant communities. . . The fact that in lower socio-economic communities where some people don't have transportation, the groceries are more expensive and gas is too. I was pretty naïve. I grew up in 98% White and traveled but I did not know these disparities that existed, the inequalities in our own area. In our schools.

As part of Jessica's program, preservice teachers participated in a class conducted in Spanish. Their professor took them to an elementary classroom where the teacher gave a lecture in Spanish about the four regions in California. This was a powerful learning activity. Jessica explained:

I understand Spanish, so it wasn't as exhausting for me, but just how 20 minutes was so exhausting [for others]! A lot of people who didn't understand any Spanish, they were so done by the end and just how much that affected you and it was just so, "I'm tired!"

This activity helped her to imagine what ELLs experience every day. "I had to really use all my energy to focus on you [the teacher] and even though you brought in pictures and we were doing movements, all of my energy had to be devoted," explained Jessica. This experience provided a glimpse into the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in another language:

. . . I feel like every teacher should have to sit through 15 minutes of another language just to see how much you really focus. It was a fourth grade lesson on the four regions of California, so it was like you already know the curriculum. It's not new concepts but just how exhausting that was!

In Peter's multicultural awareness courses, students were encouraged to par-

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ticipate in diverse cultural events. Students “were told to go to museums. We were told to bring back fliers. We went to Perez Park and Chico Heights.² There was a cool artwork place that I bought art from.” Peter mentioned that his teacher would meet up with students and go for different types of food. He got a sense that the professor wanted him to see “this is what’s out here in the world. This is what you need to be exposed to because this is what your kids are living in. This is what your kids are seeing.”

Jessica shared an additional example, in which she saw GIS³ slides that showed housing segregation patterns in Southern California:

I know the lecture was very interesting when Doug Martinez⁴ came... That was so fascinating to watch this dynamic and understand too there’s a motion of African American flight right now, they’re moving now east ... there’s no set boundaries. It’s such a fluid motion. And also the fear that people have of [other] people moving in; how much it is like, “Oh well they’re moving in, I’ve got to move out.” And how controlling it is, watching areas change from one to the other. Just so much of the fear...

It is interesting that Jessica pointed out this example. It shows the structural components of racism—the fact that housing segregation isn’t random or disorganized. Jessica explained, “It made me start questioning if integration was really possible and will it ever happen. It’s [racism] structural and methodical.”

The previous examples share a commonality—they all asked my participants to consider others’ realities. All asked students to look at life from the perspective of another ethnicity, be that Spanish-speaking or Laotian. These types of experiences are particularly salient because reflecting on others’ life experiences helps promote self-reflection. These activities help foster a kind of critical race reflection—deliberate, race-centered thinking that seeks to uncover hidden values and unconscious bias (Milner, 2003). It is the first layer on which consciousness is built. In all of these cases, students were asked to consider the language and cultural experiences of others. This switch in perspective away from one’s self is key. If a student is White, surrounded by White friends and living in a White community, she can go through life not witnessing the realities of racism as her environment precludes such experiences. However, by changing perspective and asking her to see what it is like to secure an apartment as an African American or determine the community assets in a Latino neighborhood, the lens widens. A world where multiple realities coexist begins to take shape.

A third area of course-based reflection focused on concepts teachers considered pivotal or new understandings gleaned during their programs that were instrumental in working with diverse students. With these questions, I tried to get at very precise skills or understandings they learned that proved invaluable in the classroom. Many of the teachers focused on strategies for English Language Learners (ELLs). I did not ask teachers particularly about ELLs. Instead, teachers self-selected these understandings as being most critical to their subsequent practice. Jessica men-

tioned the importance of “BICS versus CALP.” BICS stands for basic interpersonal communication skills; CALP stands for cognitive academic language proficiency. These concepts, coined by Cummins (2000), are used to differentiate the type of language children use on the playground versus the type of language needed for success with academic content. Justine mentioned ESL concepts of BICS and CALP and the importance of primary language in instruction. Peter also mentioned the importance of understanding these concepts. This intriguing commonality between the teachers is more a foundational understanding than it is a teaching practice. This distinction cautions teachers that even if children have the language ability to communicate basic needs and speak with peers, they do not necessarily have the language skills to write reports, give speeches or read text books. That type of language ability often takes many more years, and is often given as reason to support primary language development in order to keep students “up to speed” with content. This dichotomy also reminds teachers that learning a language is a long and challenging process. English or Spanish or Farsi is not learned in a year or two. Rather, the effort extends over many years.

Peter recalled further ELL components:

The whole idea of realia and structuring a lesson. . . Those were all really helpful pieces that have helped me. Just knowing that [there are] *different ways of knowing* was a really valuable piece. . . SDAIE⁵ strategy, emergent, early emergent, fluent levels for English language learners.

In these examples, instruction around how to work with English Language Learners seemed to be most salient. Other recollections focused on more general realizations that influenced the participants’ teaching and beliefs about education. Peter found it important to understand the role of alternative assessments:

We don’t just have to assess by the math test every Friday, but if we can find other ways, to make a rap song about an area or a perimeter, do a dance, too. I mean there’s lots of other ways for kids to be successful because not every child is going to be successful in that old school traditional weekly test and embrace that.

The only course Gloria took that involved racial themes was called “Helping Parents.” The course seemed intended to help teachers work with diverse families who were going through the special education system. Gloria explained learning about how people use their bodies, make eye contact, and defer to authority. She was taught about the importance in some cultures of sharing food together and how politeness is shown in Mexican culture. She emphasized that each culture had its ways of doing things and by learning the cultural norms of the populations you serve, you can better relate to families and children.

As a teacher educator, what I take out of these examples is that the teachers understood the distinctiveness of their students in a positive light. Teachers focused on lessons that highlighted the many way of learning and many ways of understanding children’s strengths and weaknesses. This cluster of examples reminds teacher

educators that we must share with students how master narratives about schooling work. K-12 students are expected to speak English, come from “traditional” families and do well on conventional metrics. When they do not, labels are often doled out and blame assessed. However, these teachers have flipped the narrative. They could have labeled their students as “lacking proficiency,” “unable to perform on tests,” and “from families who are not interested in schooling.” Or, the students could be seen as bilinguals who were in process of learning a language, who were bright and talented if assessed in the right ways, who were from families whose cultural norms might have differed from their own, but those norms did not make them lesser. Helping students identify these deeply embedded narratives and then providing them with new lenses to assess these stories seem critical in creating race-conscious teachers.

Student Teaching and Fieldwork Experiences

Participants interacted with schools and communities in several different ways during their preparation. Most only participated in fieldwork as student teachers or during their prepracticum requirements; Jessica had additional fieldwork experiences. What was common among all of the participants was that their student teaching and/or prepracticum observations took place in an urban district. Each had experiences in diverse schools. All reported having a positive experience with the students they taught. It makes sense that where you *begin* your teaching can impact where you are *willing* to teach. Teachers’ negative beliefs are often based on no real interaction in urban settings (Wolffe, 1996). If students are placed in urban settings, and learn that these schools can be positive, enriching places, myths about urban schools can be replaced with reality. If this is a teacher’s first experience in the classroom, it also serves as a baseline to what is *normal*. When *normal* includes children from diverse backgrounds and languages, then the option of teaching with a similar population down the road must seem less daunting. Diversity is all you know.

For example, Kate stated that her student teaching was wholly beneficial. It was the first time she had been part of a diverse school:

Having grown up in Westchester⁶ and never having been in one of those classrooms, you could really see the difference just with the kids, the language difficulties. I remember spending some time in a third grade ESL classroom and when I asked the teacher what can I do, she gave me this really simple I-can-read level-one book to read with this student and the student struggling with it, and me being like, “Oh my goodness.” Language really is a factor here; and just realizing things that I hadn’t recognized before...It was positive experience for me in that that was one of the reasons why I said, “Wow, that’s really where I would like to be.”

Interestingly, Gloria felt that her student teaching experience was just as instructive. Gloria grew up herself in a very diverse area, but she still pointed to student teaching as a pivotal experience in her racial understanding:

I told you I student taught in a fourth-grade classroom in an inner-city school and

I was really afraid when I went there even though I had grown up with all Black friends ... I was a little bit afraid going into an inner-city school thinking that the kids would be rough and everything. But again every teacher ought to be forced to go into an inner-city school where it's primarily Black or another ethnicity and once you're there they're wonderful. I had the best time. I didn't want to leave! But I think it was actually my student teaching experience that really, really eliminated any kind of a negative feeling. Because of everything that was going on when I was growing up, I did have preconceived notions myself, and I think the only remedy for that is experiencing it.

Gloria already started her teaching experience with a host of understandings about difference. She worried a good deal about preservice students who had little experience with diversity. Gloria previously worked in a majority-White district and was concerned that placements there did not serve preservice teachers adequately:

And I kind of worry about people who come to schools like in Flintside, it was a very wealthy and upper, upper class—they were millionaires' kids—and I had student teachers who would come to me and then they were done. And I would think their experience was very limited. You know? They did not experience an inner-city school. I almost think that should be part of teacher preparation. That they make sure that there's some time spent in a physically handicapped class, inner-city school because they could go off to Flintside or San Pablo and that would not prepare them. It's a whole different thing.

Peter also student taught at a diverse school and thought the experience was positive. "The first day, the lady [cooperating teacher] looked at me and said 'They're yours,' took her coffee, took her newspaper and I never saw her again," explained Peter. While he was not pleased with the guidance he received from his cooperating teacher, he did like his placement. "For the eight weeks I was in that classroom. . . It was great," said Peter. "I knew what I was doing. I loved those kids. It was a good little school. I was really happy."

As part of Jessica's programs, she participated in two additional fieldwork experiences. In one, she was asked to conduct a case study of a student she was observing during her prepracticum hours. She was told to get to know the student inside out. "We'd take them out and go to their house, do a home study visit and kind of figure out what made this student tick, to become aware of what this student's home life was like," she explained. "It was your very first trimester and you were brand new; you're just observing in the classroom a few days a week and then you were supposed to pick this student," she said. Jessica felt strongly that this was a mis-step on behalf of the university. She did not feel comfortable inviting herself to the student's home and interrogating her family. Instead, Jessica talked to the student at school and played with her at recess. Jessica had strong feelings about the inappropriateness of this activity, and thus, chose not to complete the home study component:

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I felt that I was crossing the line that I shouldn't. And some people did do the home study, went to their house and they were fine. I just felt like it was crossing the line that I wasn't allowed to cross...I just felt like I was a stranger on their campus. I wasn't integrated in the community and I wasn't somebody they knew. . . I felt like that was in a way pushing myself upon them almost in a way of privilege like, "I'm here, I'm observing, you need to let me in." Now I joke with my kids: "Oh, who's inviting me to their birthday party?" If they did, I would go; or when I see parents in the market, we stop and talk, because I am now a member of their community; they know me.

Thinking about it now, I think I felt like it was almost like taking an air of privilege like, "I don't know you but I'm going to come do this, and I'm going to figure you out because I'm the all-knowing person."

Jessica also was involved with a community project where she was asked to identify and address a community need. This was completed during her student teaching. She was at an urban school where teachers were concerned about gang involvement. Jessica had a vague recollection about deciding to address the need for after-school care. She worked with a team to provide information for parents about community programs by creating a pamphlet. Jessica reported, "But we weren't invested in it." When I asked her to explain, she replied:

Once again, you want me, an outsider who's maybe not even going to teach in this community, to go, "You need this, let me fill that." We were supposed to come up with a community action plan. It's almost just like an afterthought. . . I think if it were addressed in the sense of explore this community—what do you think it needs? What are its assets? What are its weaknesses? What types of things could you do on campus? Not ask you to do it, but what things could you as a teacher to help fill it. . .

I felt like it was almost crossing boundaries. Like the community, it was almost like you're asking us to find things in our community that we're not around that much. You want us to go search, you want us to get involved with this community that we're kind of still seeing as an outsider.

Jessica's experiences bring up a critical point. What is the purpose of fieldwork and what should students get out of it? One can imagine that her university planned these projects to connect students with diverse communities. I am sure many of us work in universities that have urban placement requirements, or courses that ask students to visit urban settings. However, Jessica points out that in her case, the effect was just the opposite of what was probably intended. The experiences made her think of how separate and how much of an outsider she was. Here, Jessica was very uncomfortable using the legitimacy gained from being a student at a competitive university. She felt awkward being asked to point out the community's shortcomings. Indeed, the very things that many teacher educators seek to undo, the university was actually reinforcing. For example, Jessica explained that asking students to address *problems* reinforced the fact that they were there to "fix" communities. For me, this was one of the most important realizations of this study. Are

teacher educators inadvertently reinforcing deficit beliefs? Are we asking students to see themselves as saviors through these placements? And in doing this, how do we position the communities we work with?

Conclusions

As we teacher educators continue to hone our practice and pedagogy, the feedback from these urban educators provides insights as to what is critical in preparing new teachers for urban schools. They provide an oft-forgotten set of voices that can be instrumental in helping us think through our work.

It is striking to me that all of the teachers in this study spent some of their preparatory time in urban schools. This does not seem coincidental, but foundational to their willingness to subsequently teach in urban contexts. A theme I heard repeatedly was once these teachers were in urban schools, any fears they had dissipated. Personal experiences helped them to break down negative assumptions about these schools. They began to understand the realities of the context, rather than the mythologies.

These first impressions matter. If we place teachers in urban schools where classes are chaotic and teachers are weak, we are indeed reifying the beliefs that many new teachers have. Schools of education can take steps to ensure positive placements that break down stereotypes by working with competent teachers who expect the best from their students. Kate echoes the importance of a good master teacher. When she first entered her student teaching placement, she was worried about the students and bought into some of the myths about urban schools. However, she reported “My cooperating teacher was wonderful and just—I saw how she was able to build a sense of community in her classroom.” The class broke stereotypes she held, and it was during her student teaching that she decided to seek employment in urban schools.

Thus, our upcoming teacher candidates would be well served by the opportunity to participate in urban schools. A rich student teaching experience will allow teachers to work in urban schools, under the tutelage of skillful mentors, where they can engage in meaningful activities with children who have a variety of needs.

At the same time, we must be cautious that we do not allow preservice teachers, especially White teachers, to believe they can fix/repair/save urban communities simply because they attend our universities. Field experiences should strive to ensure the dignity of the communities we work with while helping teachers understand their role as advocates and allies. Experience is the most powerful source of teacher knowledge (Haberman, 1995). Preservice teachers need opportunities to experience life in urban schools. Schools of education can work to demystify these schools for their students. Teachers will not consider working in schools they perceive as hostile, dangerous or hopeless. But clearly urban-based fieldwork must be carefully constructed. Dewey warned that “some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting growth of further experience” (1938, in Gallego, 2001, p. 312). As Jessica pointed out, some experiences can backfire and cause more harm than good. In her two nonteaching

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field experiences, Jessica felt that she was asked to overstep boundaries. With her case study, she felt like she was asked to establish relationships with students and families that were forced and inauthentic. With the action research plan, where she was asked to identify a community need, she felt that this was not her place. As a new addition to the community, she did not feel she had the experience or the legitimacy to try and point out neighborhood problems. While many of my participants echoed the importance of fieldwork, the nature of that fieldwork is crucial. Research by O'Grady and Chappell (2000) cautions against field service experiences that end up being paternalistic to the communities involved.

Quality field experiences should focus less on *exposure* and more on *engagement* (Peretti, 1997). Similarly, Gallego (2001) cautions against providing students with experiences that are service rich but learning poor. Students should be actively engaged in service activities that have a genuine (vs. contrived) benefit to the communities they serve. Thus, as teacher educators, our job should not be simply to expose students to "others." Indeed, without a savvy broker who can translate between students and their host communities, such placements can lead to teachers' misguided beliefs about children of color being reinforced. As we design opportunities for students to engage in communities different from their own, care must be taken to not be missionizing or voyeuristic. Instead, asking students to identify the strengths of individual communities may yield better outcomes. We want students to engage in communities, to find the strengths while being aware of the challenges, and to see how they can proceed as co-creators of meaningful, wanted change.

Teachers also pointed to the importance of story. Many White teachers fall into color-blind mentalities because they are ill-informed of the real, day-to-day injustices that people of color face. If you do not see it, it is hard to acknowledge it exists. Stories highlight the major and minor infractions that can create a lifetime of marginalization for people of color, low-income people, and English Language Learners. Moreover, stories and books can provide multiple perspectives in those classrooms where the student bodies are not particularly diverse. In universities that are mostly White, stories written by authors of color allow White students to "interact" with different people when the demographics of the class may otherwise prevent that. In a vicarious way, teachers can see the injustices faced by others.

Within my own courses, I have begun to capitalize on the importance of story by assigning novels and story-based non-fiction as part of the requirements. Students read books by Jonathon Kozol (2005), Mike Rose (2005), Mica Pollack (2004), Angela Valenzuela (1999), Lisa Delpit (1996), and Bob Moses (2001) about how schooling works, and does not work, for students of color, students in poverty and English Language Learners. My students watch videos produced by students from Los Angeles about the realities of schooling in their neighborhoods.⁷ These novels and videos help give teachers insights into the ways in which various groups live culturally. They help provide concrete examples about how racism and prejudice play out.

Final Thoughts

As I interviewed the teachers—and again as I read through their transcripts—a quote kept returning to my mind. It is from an interview I heard with the anthropologist Wade Davis:

The world into which we are born does not exist in some absolute sense, but rather is just one model of reality, the consequence of one set of choices made by our particular intellectual and social lineage.⁸

Across both fieldwork and coursework, much of the teachers' understandings mirrored the sentiment in this quote. Their memorable experiences helped them clarify this point: Cultural realities are multiple and shifting, each making sense to their individual actor. Actual engagement in these realities helped teachers not buy into deficit mentalities. Expanding teachers' perspectives just may be our most important job as teacher educators. Building these understandings through hands-on experiences in communities and through readings, videos and simulations provide teachers with a crucial window into the lives of different people and different ways of knowing.

Notes

¹ The term *urban* is often used interchangeably to convey both a geographical location and as a proxy for schools with high numbers of children of color. The schools in this study were located in urban (vs. suburban) areas. These were big city schools. Most students were also children of color. When I speak of preparing children for "urban schools," I use Milner's (2006) explication of urban schools as characterized by poverty, higher percentages of single parent homes, fewer material resources, greater ethnic diversity, larger school size, high teacher attrition, and many institutional barriers.

² Pseudonyms for majority Latino parts of town. All place names are pseudonyms in this text.

³ GIS: Geographic Information Systems, a modeling program which allows researchers to connect data with geographic locations. In this case, the slides are showing residential segregation patterns in Los Angeles over the last few decades.

⁴ Pseudonym for a professor at her university

⁵ SDAIE: Specially Designed Academic Instruction In English, a transitional model for teaching academic content to English Language Learners.

⁶ A predominantly White, wealthy neighborhood.

⁷ Can be found at <http://www.tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/voices/1/features/student/videos.html>

⁸ from Davis, W. (2003). On the Edge: Timbuktu (a radio interview). *National Public Radio*. <http://www.npr.org/programs/re/archivesdate/2003/may/mali/davisinterview.html>

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