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Understanding Community Voices as a Force in Teacher Education

Ryan Flessner
Butler University, rflessne@butler.edu

Paula A. Magee
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis

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Section II

Agency as Contextualized Activism

Edited by Ryan Flessner and Julie R. Horwitz

All around us, there are attacks on education. In the popular media, public schools are linked to a weak economy (Klein, 2010) and teachers are blamed for low test scores (Song & Felch, 2011). Each day, it seems, there is a headline about a new, catastrophic crisis in education. Now, we admit that there are problems in education; however, the forces currently working against educators and the public schools in which they work have created a wave of educational fanaticism that must be addressed before our nation's public schools are dismantled.

Faced with a constant barrage of attacks, some educators feel their only option is to hang their heads and bow to the pressures placed upon them by outsiders unfamiliar with the intricacies of educating all children. Yet, there are pockets of educators who are taking matters into their own hands, who are debunking the "crisis" mythology inundating the popular media. As Donnell (2010) notes, "[The] intense attention to this perceived crisis belies the fact that many . . . schools are thriving; they are effective, caring, just, and strive for success for all children, without exception" (161). These effective, caring, and just contexts must be acknowledged, supported, and celebrated.

This section on "agency as contextualized activism" highlights efforts by teacher educators who are tirelessly working to prepare future teachers and administrators to address the institutionalized norms that promote and/or inhibit educational change *at a local level*. Here, we differ from the other two sections in the book. We build on the work in Section I, where chapter authors describe the ways that critical reflection is utilized as a way to understand one's self and the society of which we are all a part. Furthermore, we provide links between this individual work and the systemic change efforts detailed by the authors in Section III of this book. We do so by highlighting specific teacher education programs and the collaborative work they are undertaking with the families, schools, and communities in their immediate contexts.

In this section, we explore the notion that in order for educators to act as agents of change, they must be intimately connected with the families of the children they teach, the communities in which they work, and the institutions that support that community. We argue that by listening to, engaging with, and acting alongside those who live, work, and inhabit our local

contexts, educators can ensure that every child receives the education s/he is rightfully due. By banding together on behalf of children, their education, and their communities, we—as communities—can directly respond to the crisis mythology.

As section editors, we wanted to provide examples of texts that could situate our understandings in the literature without limiting chapter authors to an oversimplified conception of agency as contextualized activism. Three foundational texts helped us, and the authors of each chapter in this section, organize our thoughts and inform our writing: Horton and Freire's (1990) *We Make the Road by Walking*, Murrell's (2001) *The Community Teacher: A New Framework for Effective Urban Teaching*, and "Community Knowledge-centered Teacher Education: A Paradigm for Socially Just Educational Transformation" by Hyland and Meachum (2004). These texts mark a progression from community activism on a broader level to more urgent calls for action in the field of teacher education.

In their book, Horton and Freire (1990) engage in a dialogue about their work as community organizers. They teach us about the importance of relationships and how these relationships lead to social and political movements within communities. If we truly believe that change must occur in our schools, in our communities, and in our world, we must connect in authentic ways with those who have knowledge about the history, resources, and strengths of our local communities. As the authors note, "Without understanding the soul of the culture we just invade the culture" (131). Horton and Freire, thus, remind us to dig in and commit to the hard work necessary to truly make change.

Murrell (2001), then, creates a framework to help us enact this change within the field of education. Rather than remaining isolated in the comfort of our individual educational silos, his work promotes collaboration with other stakeholders in education. Specifically, he calls on university-based educators and P–12 practitioners to engage parents, business owners, religious leaders, and other community members (who are often far removed from educational institutions) in discussions about the schooling of their children. In describing this work, Murrell states:

> Schools of education in partnership with school faculty have to avoid the fatal assumption that they know all they need to know about the culture, values, traditions, and heritages of the people they purportedly serve. The need is to organize human systems in schools to elevate practice, which requires accessing knowledge from those who have it. (31)

While we hope this section helps others to engage in dialogue and action related to contextualized activism, we agree with Murrell that there are no silver bullets. Individual issues, ideas, and answers come from within communities themselves.

Given our understandings of the two texts described above, we are inspired by the work of Hyland and Meachum (2004), who implore educators to rise to the challenge. After identifying a host of challenges faced by teacher educators (the fairly homogeneous population of preservice teachers, bureaucratic structures within school systems, the current structures framing teaching and teacher education, deficit perspectives toward—and the marginalization of—non-dominant populations), the authors construct a model for teacher education that challenges every educator and every community member to "become a teacher for the other" (124). By laying the options before us—quit, remain ambivalent, or step up and organize—these authors challenge us all to truly engage in meaningful change.

The authors in Section II of this book answer this call to action—to step up and engage. Their chapters highlight the struggles and the difficulties faced in organizing for change. Yet, their passion, their commitment, and their efforts shine through as they describe the work in which they engage.

In Chapter 5, Ryan Flessner and Paula Magee describe several frameworks of community-based teacher education currently in existence. In examining the benefits as well as the shortcomings of these frameworks, the authors set out to rethink the ways they engage with a variety of "community voices" in order to improve their own teacher education practices. In doing so, Flessner and Magee describe ways educators and community members, together, can harness their expertise in order to create quality programs of teacher education.

Next, Michael Evans describes complex issues that have plagued educators, families, and communities as they attempt to organize for change. In Chapter 6, Evans addresses these issues and offers a model of *boundary-spanning competencies* that allows educators to address these complex issues. The chapter highlights the efforts of Miami (Ohio) University's teacher education program to infuse this framework into their graduate-level education programs through the use of community-based experiences.

Chapter 7, by Rashmi Kumar, Christopher Pupik Dean, and NancyLee Bergey, examines a teacher education program at the University of Pennsylvania. The authors contend that when pre-service teachers are asked to identify assets within local communities, they will be better equipped to work as agents of change. By describing the courses and projects within one specific teacher education program, Kumar, Dean, and Bergey offer teacher educators a working model of teacher preparation that embodies contextualized activism.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Mary Klehr provides narrative stories of her work with pre-service teachers in a Professional Development School partnership at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Specifically, the chapter describes a community-based requirement of the program and the ways that some pre-service teachers capitalize on this opportunity to engage with families and other members of the community (while others view it as an imposed task to complete for course credit). A school-based clinical supervisor in the partnership program, Klehr contends that relationships built with a host of stakeholders over a sustained period of time provide spaces for pre-service teachers to examine issues of culture, community, agency, and activism.

Each of the chapters in Section II offers a different take on the concept of "agency as contextualized activism." What all of the authors share is a commitment to changing the way that teacher education addresses important issues that are often left ignored. They question what counts as knowledge in teacher education; they explore how teachers build on this knowledge to work toward change; and they examine who educates future teachers and where that learning occurs. As stated in the introduction to this book, each of these is a central focus of the Association of Teacher Educators' Commission for Agency in Teacher Education.

If educators want to delegitimize the crisis mythology currently running rampant in the popular media, we must show our communities that we are ready to change the way we educate their children. Moreover, we must rethink the way we prepare our future teachers to engage with communities, to understand the strengths, resources, and needs of the neighborhoods surrounding our schools, and to partner with community members in building on the knowledge of those who work with, live with, and love the children we serve.

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Chapter Five

Understanding Community Voices as a Force in Teacher Education

Ryan Flessner and Paula A. Magee

Much can be accomplished when teacher educators make strong connections with community members who have shown a commitment to their local public schools and the children within those schools. We believe pre-service teachers enrolled in a teacher education program tied to schools that actively cultivate relationships within their communities will have a better understanding of ways to effectively engage students in the learning process. Furthermore, pre-service teachers who are immersed in school contexts that value the connections within, and the development of, their communities will see themselves as community activists, will see teaching and learning as integrally tied to the communities in which they work, and will look to community members, families, and other stakeholders to build a relevant curriculum for all students.

This chapter describes efforts we, two teacher educators, are making as we attempt to improve our practices related to issues of agency in teacher education. We begin by examining literature in the field of teacher education. We stress the importance of beliefs and practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy, community research projects, community-based practicum placements, and cultural-immersion programs. We then explore several popular frameworks related to community-based teacher education (e.g., the professional development school, the full service community school, etc.). In doing so, we highlight the challenges teacher educators face in preparing future teachers to see themselves as agents of change within schools and communities. After this introduction to the relevant literature, we explore ways we are addressing these challenges as we work to connect our teacher education practices to our local communities and schools. We describe how we listen to, and utilize, the voices of various stakeholders within our communities in an effort to improve our teacher education practices.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Teacher Education Practices

Educational practitioners and researchers have much to say about what pre-service teachers can do to connect their practice to the communities they serve. For example, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009) entails the thoughtful integration of students' home-

and community-based experiences and competencies into classroom practice. By examining traditional practices and critically examining the ways in which these practices affect students from non-dominant backgrounds, educators can begin to rethink what is necessary to educate all students in just and meaningful ways. As "orchestrators of social contexts for learning" (Gay, 2000, 43), teachers validate the competencies that students bring to the classroom, they empower their students by scaffolding learning opportunities for all students, and they extend students' thinking in order to make school an emancipatory experience.

Others have written about the need for pre-service teachers to understand and experience the communities in which they practice in deep and meaningful ways. Sleeter (2001), for instance, describes community research projects that engage future teachers in collecting data about the neighborhoods in which they will practice. Irvine (2003) suggests that teacher educators create authentic ways for pre-service teachers to interact with community centers, culturally diverse religious institutions, after-school programs, and other nonschool settings. Some programs go even further, asking students to live in the communities in which they practice. Cross-cultural immersion projects, such as the PARTNER Project at Illinois State University, are beginning to appear across the country. The PARTNER Project provides teachers-to-be with housing options within the Little Village community of Chicago. In doing so, the university provides the future teachers with in-depth opportunities to engage in, and with, the community where they work (Lee & Radner, 2006).

Future teachers who engage in the practices listed above gain a comprehensive knowledge of the students with whom they work and the communities they serve. Interestingly, little writing exists that encourages teacher educators to engage in these same types of efforts. Several scholars have noted a disconnect between the backgrounds and experiences of teachers—and their teacher educators—and the dramatically shifting student demographic (Schulte, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zumwalt & Craig, 2008). Therefore, we see a need for teacher educators, themselves, to engage in the same types of activities espoused for pre-service teachers. As teacher educators, we, too, can address issues such as culturally relevant teaching in our courses; we can interact in our local communities by attending neighborhood association meetings, patronizing local businesses, and connecting with stakeholders invested in the communities of our local schools; we can empower and utilize community experts as nontraditional teacher educators; and, probably most importantly, we can continually examine our own cultures and the influence that our cultures have on our teaching and our students' learning (Galman, Pica-Smith & Rosenberger, 2010). In doing so, university-based teacher educators can model the types of behaviors and dispositions they hope to instill in the future teachers with whom they work.

Community-Based Frameworks of Teacher Preparation

While the ideas listed above provide wonderful examples of how pre-service teachers—alongside their teacher educators—can integrate themselves into the communities they serve, there is a risk that isolated courses and experiences will not create the types of change we hope to see. The need exists to more fully integrate these ideas into the entire fabric of teacher education programs. Below, we highlight several frameworks that teacher educators have developed—along with other stakeholders within the educational arena—in an effort to comprehensively improve the preparation of future teachers. We examine the strengths of each framework but also explore concerns that have been identified in the literature. While each framework has its strengths and drawbacks, all offer us opportunities to continually enhance our community partnerships as we improve our practices as teacher educators.

Professional Development Schools

Coined by the Holmes Group (1986), the term *professional development school* (PDS) typically refers to a site-based partnership in which university faculty members, classroom practitioners, and school administrators engage in collaborative work to systematically analyze, design, and improve the preparation of future teachers for classroom practice. Building on the concept of teaching hospitals in the field of medicine (Goodlad, 1990; Hyland & Meacham, 2004) as well as the laboratory schools popular in the early twentieth century (Darling-Hammond, 2006), PDSs have the potential to bridge the oft-noted gap between educational theory and classroom practice (Teitel, 2003).

Over the past two and a half decades, there has been exponential growth in the number of PDS partnerships across the country (Rutter, 2005). This growth is due, in large part, to the vast array of benefits attributed to the PDS model. Beyond bridging the gap between theory and practice, other benefits to the PDS model include an increased alignment between program philosophy and curriculum (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), an elevation in professional dialogue between practicing teachers (Hudson-Ross, 2001), a marked change from teachers-as-*researched* to teachers-as-*researchers* (Ary et al., 2010), and better relationships between teachers-to-be, classroom practitioners, and university faculty (Mitchel & Hindin, 2008). In addition, research on PDS programs found that, in relation to their peers in more traditional teacher education programs, PDS student teachers were more confident, applied theory to practice more frequently, and were more aware of the ways in which the broader educational system affected their work (Clift & Brady, 2005).

However, Zeichner (2009) warns that the research on PDSs is often misleading. He notes that variations in program structure and function along with selection criteria for the different PDS programs makes this body of research questionable. Furthermore, Boyle-Baise and McIntyre (2008) fear that the PDS model places too much emphasis on future teachers' academic understandings without regard for the communities of which the schools are a part. Similarly, Hyland and Meacham (2004) warn that while universities and public schools are working more collaboratively, these "tightly-coupled" partnerships often reinforce the hierarchical nature of the relationships between educational institutions and families.

Full Service Community Schools

Another approach, the full service community school (FSCS) (Bingler, Quinn & Sullivan, 2003; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002), focuses on the overall health and well-being of children and their families. By creating a school that offers "full services," schools that act as FSCSs can offer "case management, primary health clinics, youth development programs, family resource centers, early childhood development, after school programs and school reform" (Peebles-Wilkins, 2004, 2) to children and their families. The FSCS model addresses the physical, emotional, and social needs of children and their families in a concrete manner by offering a site—the school—for these vital services to be delivered (Children's Aid Society, 2001). When children and families are healthy, their ability to focus on schoolwork and to engage in school activities increases. In this model, children and their families are receiving the supports and resources that they need to improve their experiences inside *and outside* of school.

While the FSCS framework advocates for a community-based school curriculum and school reform, the bulk of the work has been on planning for, assessing the need of, and securing access to resources that traditionally fall outside of the school curriculum (Ames &

Farrell, 2005). The difficult integration of the community into the classroom curriculum, as more than a stand-alone problem-based learning experience, for example, has been underutilized. This work is just now beginning to pick up steam as a movement itself.

One key player in this area is The Coalition for Community Schools. The coalition has outlined detailed rationales for connecting the school curriculum to the community (Melaville, Berg & Blank, n.d.). The underlying tenets to this approach include an awareness that all stakeholders need to work together for the success of children and that schools must draw on the funds of knowledge (Moll et al.,1992) of their students, families, and neighbors as a way to meaningfully educate children. While these ideas seem logical, in today's climate of high-stakes testing, these critical practices are often left behind as schools and teachers focus on increasing test scores and the memorization of facts devoid of context.

Clearly the success of a community-based curriculum is dependent on many individuals, but perhaps, most importantly, its success depends on the commitment of the classroom teachers. Support of the teacher encourages and fosters collaboration from the many community members (families, business owners, faith-based organizations, and local civic groups). Having said that, some have expressed concern that teachers who see themselves primarily as public servants may prioritize this aspect of education over the teaching and learning of academic content (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008).

Although this FSCS framework has a long history—dating back to the 1930s—it has not been deeply integrated into teacher education programs (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008). According to The Coalition for Community Schools' website, "We do not know of any comprehensive programs that have a community schools focus. Some principal preparation and teacher training programs focus on family and community challenges or helping teachers use the community as a resource for learning, but in reality family and community are typically given short shrift." Clearly learning how to include the community into the more traditionally academic-focused world of teacher preparation is not easy, but it is a challenge worthy of pursuit.

While the PDS and community school frameworks provide well-known examples of what community-based teacher education programs can be, there are other frameworks currently under study. The beauty of this movement rests in the idea that educators everywhere are continually addressing the need for community-based teacher education. With these efforts comes a responsibility to listen to one another, to act, to share our ideas, to value diversity in programming, and to continue our quest to interact with a variety of stakeholders. We now turn to additional frameworks in an effort to show how the field is continuing to push its thinking in relation to quality teacher education.

Other Frameworks

In order to improve upon or better utilize the strengths of the frameworks detailed above, a variety of scholars continue to delineate ways that teacher educators can connect with their communities, rethink how teacher education is delivered and who educates future teachers, and engage pre-service teachers in establishing and utilizing community connections that will influence their practice. For instance, Murrell (2001) introduced the concept of the *community teacher* in an effort to address failures within traditional teacher education programs. In addition to the bridges formed between university education departments and our nation's public schools—as in the PDS framework—Murrell (2001) suggests that a third party must be involved in the redesign of teacher education. That third party is "the community of adults who work with children in urban neighborhoods and centers of youth development" (2). Capitalizing on the knowledge gained from all parties, a community teacher has a deep

understanding of students, families, and communities and incorporates this knowledge into her/his teaching. In doing so, the community teacher ensures that all children are academically competent individuals who play critical roles in their communities.

In their work, Hyland and Meacham (2004) build on the conception of the community teacher by introducing their *community knowledge-centered* (CKC) framework of teacher preparation. The authors suggest that schools must become "sites of power" designed to address the injustices in society and in educational institutions. In this model, teacher educators work with other stakeholders to assist future teachers in understanding the functionality of schools within broader community structures. Specifically addressing the need for community involvement and activism, the authors demand a change in traditional teaching practices, thus, addressing concerns in both the PDS and community school frameworks.

CREATING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The literature noted above tells us much about what we can do to engage with other stakeholders as we prepare teachers for our nation's schools. In the sections below, we describe efforts we feel are necessary in order to create community partnerships that will strengthen our teacher education practices. Building on the work of others, we highlight ways that we, as teacher educators, can engage—and have engaged—with our communities to provide high-quality teacher education.

Identifying and Utilizing Community Voices

Teacher Educators

Above, we discussed several approaches that teacher educators can utilize in order to better understand the community of which they are a part as they attempt to model the types of teaching and the dispositions they hope pre-service teachers will demonstrate. In doing so, teacher educators become voices within the community that can advocate for change. In our own experience, we have found that this process is something that develops over time. In order to engage a group of teacher educators in this type of work, it is essential to know one another, to listen to a variety of perspectives, and to identify beliefs that are similar. As we (the authors of this chapter) began our discussions, we engaged in conversations about the ideas we believed were foundational to the preparation of future teachers, improving our teacher education practices, and rethinking our teacher education program as a whole.

At the university where we met, faculty members were tied to particular content areas (for instance, Ryan was a professor of elementary mathematics methods courses and Paula was a professor of elementary science methods courses), communication among the various content areas was minimal, and there was a strong administrative focus on the accreditation of our programs. These foci created barriers to the types of changes we hoped to make within our individual courses and within our pre-service teacher preparation program. Given these limitations, it was essential for the success of our program that we find a group of teacher educators that could challenge these ways of thinking. We knew, starting out, that those who had philosophies of education different from ours would see focusing on community-based teacher education as something "extra." Therefore, we were very deliberate in identifying faculty members with whom we thought we could partner. The group of instructors that we gathered knew that engaging in this type of work was necessary. Each of us understood that this type of work was in the best interest of children, the community, teachers, and the profession.

For many decades, university-based teacher educators have been the dominant voice in discussions focusing on the preparation of future teachers. Unfortunately, the mainstream media and political climate have turned against teacher educators in recent times. Thus, university-based teacher educators must engage a host of other voices as we move forward in improving the education of those who will teach our nation's children. Therefore, early in our discussions, we made a commitment to listening to the voices of a variety of other community members as we took action to change our instructional practices—individually—and our teacher education program—collectively.

P–12 Educators

In recent history, university-based teacher educators have moved beyond the boundaries of their campuses to engage P–12 educators in conversations surrounding the preparation of future teachers. Typically, these partnerships are created in an effort to better align the messages sent to future teachers in the university courses and their field placements (Bullough et al., 2004) or to collaborate on projects that are both research- *and* practice-based (e.g., Carpenter et al., 1999). Very little work, however, capitalizes on the expertise that P–12 educators have about their local communities. Rather, classroom practitioners are lauded as content and/ or pedagogical experts (e.g., Baumert et al., 2010). In order for future teachers to understand their roles as agents of change, we must engage P–12 educators who see themselves in this light as we continue conversations about quality teacher preparation.

In our work together as university-based teacher educators, we partnered with local elementary schools to discuss inquiry-based teaching (IBT) in the areas of mathematics and science (Magee & Flessner, 2011a, 2011b, in press). While each of us is familiar with IBT and the content under study, our positions at the university did not allow us to interact with young children in exploring this type of learning on a regular basis. Therefore, we engaged classroom practitioners in conversations, demonstrations, and studies of IBT. As our relationships with the teachers deepened, we moved beyond content, pedagogy, and classroom management in our conversations with our school-based partners. We were able to see culturally relevant pedagogy enacted in real classrooms with real children. We witnessed the teachers engaging children in inquiries surrounding topics such as peace, the importance of reusing and recycling, and the gentrification of the neighborhood surrounding the school. These practitioners saw themselves as community activists working within and outside of their classrooms. We learned much from them, and we continue to incorporate these experts and what they have taught us into our work as teacher educators.

In one case, an elementary school with whom we were working became the pilot site for a new manifestation of our pre-service teacher education program. For two years, a core group of faculty members and the school staff worked on-site with a cohort of twenty-four pre-service teachers. In this work, faculty taught their methods courses on-site at the school, placing heavy emphasis on the integration of research and practice. Communication with the classroom teachers provided them with a voice in the preparation of the future teachers who were in their school and in their classrooms. The teachers helped identify teaching tasks that the pre-service teachers would be expected to accomplish during their practicum placements, had input into the assignments for the courses, and supervised the future teachers as they became contributing members of the school community.

Traditionally, pre-service teachers enrolled in the elementary program at the university had been assigned a Community Survey project. This project had, historically, been tied to the first semester of the teacher education program. In the new partnership, this project became foundational to their study across their two-year experience in the school. For example, practition-

ers at the school knew of the project and encouraged the pre-service teachers to integrate information learned during the Community Survey into an archeological project they constructed during their practicum placements. Because the teachers were an integral part of the conversation related to the education of pre-service teachers, they were aware of the Community Survey project and were able to guide the pre-service teachers in integrating community knowledge into the curriculum with children.

As noted by Shulman (2004), a proactive dialectic between university-based faculty and school-based practitioners must ensue if educators are to make substantial changes to the preparation of future teachers. However, that dialectic—in itself—is not enough, even if those discussions focus on the strengths and resources of the community in which future teachers are practicing. To truly engage teachers-to-be in understanding their roles as change agents, other voices must be heard: the voices of those who live within, work in, and have a deep understanding of the communities we serve.

Community Members

In addition to engaging educational practitioners, other stakeholders within the community must have a voice in discussions related to the improvement of teacher education and the educational experiences of children. By engaging community experts (students, parents, business owners, religious leaders, etc.) in thoughtful conversations about the strengths and resources of their communities, teacher educators can deepen their understandings of the communities in which they work to train future teachers.

For instance, in our work with one of the schools mentioned above, we identified a woman who held a support position at the school. As we watched her answer questions about the school, interact with parents who visited the classrooms, and engage in conversations with students she knew from the neighborhood, we realized this woman had important information to share with us as teacher educators. We organized a formal interview in which the woman discussed her experiences as a resident in the community. During that interview, we learned about the strengths, needs, resources, and history of the neighborhood. In addition, we were connected with other community residents who had things to share with us and with our pre-service teachers.

One of these connections was crucial during the first semester of our partnership with the
school. Because the school was doing construction work for their expansion, there was no
place for the pre-service teachers to gather for their methods courses. Through the network of community members that had been established, the faculty members were able to identify a church in the neighborhood that was willing to offer space to hold classes when the future teachers weren't in the actual elementary classrooms. While faculty initially weren't thrilled about being away from the school, holding class within the church offered a unique opportunity to connect with another group of community members. In addition, the pre-service teachers participated more authentically in the community by engaging in church functions such as a cookout and fund-raisers.

Furthermore, the teachers-to-be were forced to examine assumptions that they held about the neighborhood. Their classes were held in a pole barn outside the church. At first, this seemed less than glamorous to the pre-service teachers. The structure wasn't exactly what they were used to on campus. Walking into the pole barn, however, surprised the teachers-to-be. Inside, they found a classroom space, a full-service kitchen, and a DJ cage used on weekends to attract youth from the community. Suddenly, the future teachers were confronted with evidence that the church was more than a religious institution. They had firsthand evidence of the church's commitment to the neighborhood and to its children—whether or not they or their

families were members of the church. This opportunity offered an important reminder to us and to the students we teach that it's not just the school that is serving the kids in a community.

GATHERING AT THE TABLE

While there are many ways that teacher educators can engage a variety of stakeholders in conversations that can improve teacher preparation, amazing opportunities emerge when all stakeholders take on the responsibilities of educating future teachers. In this way, we hope to encourage the field to expand upon traditional understandings of who educates future teachers and how future teachers are prepared. In order to do so, we must ensure that all those who have a stake in the education of children gather at the table so that all voices are heard. Having said that, it is essential that teacher educators realize that this work involves more than simply listening to these voices. It is imperative that the ideas shared at the table become foundational to our university-based courses, that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to engage with all those seated at the table, and that the community understands that these efforts are the beginning of a long-term commitment. Building on the work of the scholars noted earlier in the chapter, we attend to several key ideas that we believe will help us in constructing true community partnerships. Below, we examine three of these key ideas: community engagement and recruitment, identifying core beliefs, and informing and improving teacher education practices.

Prior to engaging in this discussion, it is important to remind the reader that this work is still in its infancy—we, as teacher educators, are still making mistakes, improvements, and changes. We are reminded on a daily basis that our understandings continue to emerge, morph, and conflict. We embrace this change, and we are transparent about this process with our pre-service teachers. With a changing faculty, with staff changes at the school, and with a constant fluctuation of community partners, it is essential that conversations continue, that the work is continuously renegotiated in the best interest of all parties. Below, we describe some of our efforts to gather stakeholders together to ensure a host of voices are empowered in decisions about the education of young children.

Community Engagement and Recruitment

While time-consuming, engaging with the community members *within a variety of community settings* is essential to partnership work. By engaging in community events (musical events, religious gatherings, etc.), partnering with—and participating in—local neighborhood associations, teacher educators can demonstrate their willingness to invest in a community and its residents. During these events, teacher educators can interact with community experts in an effort to continue learning about the neighborhood, its resources, history, strengths, and needs. Through these networking efforts we have found that we—alongside other members of the community—are better able to see the bigger picture. We're better able to identify and utilize a host of voices as we design, implement, and improve our teacher education practices.

Identifying Core Beliefs

Once community experts are identified, it's essential for teacher educators to bring together a variety of voices. To begin, we believe it is essential that everyone who has a stake in the education of a community's children must identify their core beliefs about education. To begin this discussion, we utilize the School Reform Institute's (n.d.) "It Takes a Village" protocol.

In this protocol, participants are asked to write a core belief that they hold about the education of young children. Members of the group then use a variety of materials (provided by the facilitator) to create an image/object that represents their individual core beliefs. When the creative process is complete, each member of the group is asked to share their image/object and the way it represents her/his core belief about education. As images/objects are presented, participants are asked to group related ideas next to one another. As the discussion proceeds, a "village" of artifacts is created. The village then serves as the "text" to be discussed. In doing so, group members identify themes, similarities, differences, and ways that the beliefs can be actualized in practice. One important note is that we begin by identifying our own core beliefs as teacher educators. We then engage our school-based partners in a similar discussion. Finally, we gather community stakeholders and facilitate a conversation to identify their core beliefs.

Gathering different stakeholders to discuss their understandings and beliefs about the education of the children of their neighborhood tells us much about the community members with whom we will be working. It tells us not only what they believe, but we learn how we, as teacher educators, are similar in our beliefs and how we are different. We value the similarities as well as the differences in the core beliefs of these different groups as they provide us with alternate views, priorities, and dreams for the children in our schools.

Because of this, we feel it is essential—once each group (teacher educators, school partners, and community members) has identified its core beliefs—to gather everyone together at one table. Together, the beliefs of each group can be presented, discussed, and validated. Rather than attempting to create one set of core beliefs for the group, we believe that each set of core beliefs adds something to the mix. Instead of homogenizing the discussion, we decide what each set of beliefs means for the group. We address questions such as: What are our next steps? Who has the skills and resources to ensure that our core beliefs are lived in our schools and in our communities? What additional supports will be necessary to truly enact our core beliefs?

Most importantly, these conversations hold group members accountable to one another. When the time comes that difficult decisions must be made, the core beliefs defined early in the partnerships become the basis for those decisions. In doing so, conversations continue to be based in the core beliefs of all stakeholders, lip service is avoided, and the core-beliefs process is validated.

Informing and Improving Teacher Education Practices

Next, we take it upon ourselves as teacher educators to utilize the information gathered through these discussions in our teacher education courses. We, ourselves, attempt to model the act of "being present" in a community. By interacting with the various stakeholders in a variety of ways, we continue to learn information that can improve our teacher education practices. More importantly, though, we examine the strengths and resources of all parties in order to identify those within the community that can provide nontraditional forms of teacher education. We identify ways that community members can visit our teacher education courses to speak on panels, lead workshops, lead community walks for our students, or engage preservice teachers in afterschool or summer programming. In return, we incorporate information we gain from these interactions into class sessions and assignments, we promote the idea of "teacher education as a community effort," and we make concerted efforts to ensure that future teachers are equipped with the knowledge and dispositions to engage with communities in productive and relevant ways.

The next logical step is to acknowledge that it is time for teacher educators to shed light on the possibilities for contextualized action inherent in these practices. By actively searching for a variety of community voices, we believe that we can assist pre-service teachers in knowing their communities, understanding the strengths and needs of the communities, and engaging with those they serve. In doing so, pre-service teachers have the potential to engage in contextualized activism, create meaningful relationships with a variety of community members, and improve their teaching practices by creating foundational beliefs about the importance of community voices not only in their own education, but in the education of young children.

CONCLUSION

As previously stated, much can be accomplished when teacher educators make strong connections with community members who have shown a commitment to their local public schools and the children educated within those schools. The ideas discussed in this chapter describe our preliminary efforts, as teacher educators, to build long-term relationships with a variety of community members as our instructional practices continue to evolve.

If future teachers are to see themselves as agents of change, they must be surrounded by community members—their teacher educators included—who see themselves in this light. If we hope to instill a sense of agency through our teacher education programs, we need to seek, foster, and utilize sustained partnerships within the communities we serve. In doing so, we model the types of contextualized activism we hope to see our students enact.

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