The Impact of Service Learning on Pre-service Teachers Preconceptions of Urban Education

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Urban schools, especially those serving high minority, high poverty, and low performing students, are in desperate need of high-quality teachers, yet issues with retention, recruitment, and preparedness plague urban districts (Aragon, Culpepper, McKee & Perkins, 2014). Teacher educators are challenged to prepare teacher candidates to overcome misconceptions about urban schools. This study was designed to explore the effects that one sustained, supervised, course-based service learning experience had on preservice teachers' preconceptions and attitudes towards urban education. Surveys were administered to 38 teacher candidates before and after their service learning experience at an urban charter school. Results were analyzed using paired samples t-tests and indicated significant changes in attitudes towards the facilities, teaching materials and neighborhood safety for urban schools. Implications for teacher educators are examined.

Introduction

The diverse students in American classrooms need teachers who are prepared to work effectively with students from different backgrounds (Keenqwe, 2010; Ross & Smith, 1992). Urban schools, especially those serving high minority, high poverty, and low performing students, are in desperate need of high-quality teachers, yet issues with retention, recruitment, and preparedness plague urban districts (Aragon, Culpepper, McKee & Perkins, 2014). A study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that teacher turnover in low-income urban schools is almost a third higher than the national average (Barnes, Crowe, & Shaefer, 2007). Policymakers attempt to recruit recent graduates of teacher preparation programs to fill these vacant positions, yet teacher candidates often feel less prepared and less confident to teach in urban schools (Siwatu, 2011) and are also less interested in teaching what they believe to be the typical urban students (Groulx, 2001; Schwarz, 2003).

One explanation for pre-service teachers' reluctance to work in an urban school district stems from their perceptions of urban schools and what they perceive to be the challenges faced by educators in urban settings (Tiezzi & Cross, 1997; Watson, 2011; Bakari, 2003). Researchers examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban schools through analyses of teacher

candidates' responses to open-ended questions about urban schools and students. This study found that their teacher candidates perceived urban schools as run-down, chaotic, dirty, overcrowded, and unsafe. They believed that urban schools lacked resources and funding that affected their facilities, such as physical education spaces, and materials such as computers (Hampton, Peng and Ann, 2008). One study found that the majority of preservice teachers reported that their first impressions and reactions about interacting with English Language Learners were punctuated with fear, anxiety, and even shock (Keengwe, 2010). One student even noted "The thought of spending time with a person of another background scared me. I am neither a racist nor do I have anything against people of different skin color than my own. I simple haven't been given the opportunity to get to know someone with a different ethnicity" (Keengwe, 2010, p. 200).

Teacher candidates from predominantly white, suburban backgrounds may try to remain "colorblind" in their efforts to foster equality in their classrooms. These well-intentioned efforts may actually prevent them from seeing important cultural and ethnic differences that could help them to be more effective teachers of diverse students (Aragon, Culpeper, McKee & Perkins, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto & Bode, 2012, Ullucci & Batey, 2011). Researchers have found that when preservice teachers contemplated working with children in an urban setting and with children from diverse cultural backgrounds, they may bring lower expectations for student achievement (Bakari, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2012). One study found that preconceptions of preservice teachers were that the children were lacking confidence, low in self-esteem, not trusting, under achieving and unmotivated (Museus, 2008). These preservice teachers may be forming their perceptions of urban schools based on secondary sources, such as media coverage, and not on personal experience. Some research has found that preservice teachers have changed their views about urban children after experiences in urban schools, coming to describe their students as friendly, shy, humorous, honest, willing, responsible, and mature (Larke, Wiseman, & Bradley, 1990).

A need exists in education for future teachers to have the skills to work with diverse groups of races, cultures and languages that students represent in the classroom (Keengwe, 2010). Many multicultural scholars argue the need for teachers to have and gain the knowledge and skills to work with students from different backgrounds (Banks 2006; Cushner et al. 2009; Nieto & Bode 2008 and Keengwe, 2010). Diversity is essential because many preservice

teachers may embrace various misconceptions, false beliefs, stereotypes, and inaccurate attitudes about minorities (Vaughn, 2005). These misperceptions may influence the way in which teachers conduct themselves in the classroom and their teaching (Sadker et al.,2008). These misconceptions for instance may affect student growth in the classroom both academically and educationally. Successful teachers in the classroom often possess cultural competence (Saluja et al., 2002). If teachers lack this cross cultural competence or ignore different cultural expressions of development, conflicts may surface and lead to student failure in the classroom (Neito & Bode, 2008). Thus, cross-cultural experiences in an urban setting are important to the successful development of both the preservice teachers and students. Many higher education institutions lack both the coursework and or field experiences to prepare these teachers for the cultural diversity they will face in today's classroom (Ray et al., 2006).

Exposure to urban schools, students, and teachers is an obvious antidote for misconceptions, yet the most successful preparation comes from a combination of coursework and clinical experience (Groulx, 2001; Lee & Radner, 2006; Nieto, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). Hampton et al. (2008) summarized their findings that urban field placements resulting in improved perceptions generally included these components: (a) extended exposure to urban schools; (b) close supervision with opportunities to share, discuss and reflect on the placement experience; and (c) connections between the field experience and coursework. There is growing agreement that direct, sustained experience is key for facilitating multicultural understanding, changing monocultural perspectives and promoting self-discovery (Wiest, 1998; Zeichner &Melnick, 1996).

This study was designed to explore the effects that one sustained, supervised, course-based service learning experience had on preservice teachers' preconceptions and attitudes towards urban education. The purpose of this investigation was to examine whether a service learning project in an urban school can help teachers to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that will support their work with children from urban communities.

The research questions were:

1. What are the perceptions of these preservice teachers regarding urban school settings in relation to the following issues: neighborhoods, physical school buildings, resources and materials in the school, attributes

of urban students and their families, and teacher candidates' imagining of themselves as teachers in an urban setting?

2. How does this urban service learning project impact preservice teachers' attitudes and perceptions of urban education?

Methodology

Site of Study

This study took place at a Professional Development School under the direction of a college professor and the school librarian at a K-8 charter school located in a medium-sized city in New York State. Teacher candidates enrolled in the teacher education program of a local college participated in "Book Club," a Saturday morning reading program at the school, to fulfill the service learning requirement of their Introduction to Literacy Instruction course. The teacher candidates came to the school on a weekly basis over the course of one semester. One of the course assignments required the teacher candidates to prepare an hour–long literacy lesson based on a children's book of their choosing in accordance with a weekly theme. The teacher candidates were trained in their college course on how to plan and implement a read-aloud lesson, including determining an objective, introducing the lesson, building background knowledge and vocabulary, keeping students engaged during the read-aloud, and a follow-up activity that would extend students' understanding of the book. The teacher candidates were also expected to go over rules and expectations, set the tone for the lesson, and manage behavior and time during the hour-long lesson. Early in the week, the teacher candidates submitted their lesson plans for feedback from their college professor and/or the school librarian. Supplies, such as crayons and construction paper they might need were made available at the school.

On Saturday mornings, each teacher candidate was assigned a small group of two to five students of approximately the same grade level. The teacher candidate brought the group to a pre-assigned classroom within the school and began the hour-long lesson. The professor and librarian checked in on the groups, but the teacher candidates were seen as the adults in charge of their small groups of students for the full hour.

Participants

A total of 38 teacher candidates participated in this study. All were enrolled in the Introduction to Literacy Instruction course at the local college. Seventeen students took the course in the spring semester of the year under study, and 21 took the course in the fall semester. Thirty-five were female and three were male. Students completed the course early in their program, usually in the sophomore year. The Introduction to Literacy Instruction course marked the first time in their teacher training program that teacher candidates were required to participate in a field placement at a school.

Setting

The neighborhood in which the urban school was located had a poverty rate and a crime rate 2.5 times higher than the U.S. average in 2013, and the median household income was $25,548. At this urban school, 95% of the students were African American and 98% qualified for free reduced lunch.

Measure

To measure teacher candidates' attitudes and perceptions of urban education we developed and administered a pre- and post-survey. The survey had 8 Likert-type items that required participants to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with various statements about urban education. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There were 3 positively stated statements about urban education (e.g., "urban schools are just as clean and well-kept as non-urban schools") and 5 negatively-stated statements about urban education (e.g., "Urban schools are unsafe"). These were randomly mixed in the survey.

Based primarily on the research by Hampton and colleagues (2008) of misconceptions that teacher candidates have on urban education, the questions dealt with the following issues: urban neighborhoods, the physical school buildings and the resources and materials in the school, attributes of urban students, and teacher candidates' imagining of themselves as teachers in an urban setting.

The pre- and post-surveys were exactly the same with the exception of one open-ended response, which had a slight change. On the pre-survey, candidates were asked, "Please tell us about your expectations for your placement at an urban school this semester. You may discuss

your expectations for the neighborhood, school building, resources, students, families, teachers, etc. You may discuss your feelings in anticipation of the assignment as well as past experiences that have contributed to your feelings and expectations." On the post-survey, we asked, "How do your views on urban education now compare with your views at the beginning of the semester? What changed? What was confirmed? You may discuss your views of the neighborhood, school building, resources, students, families, teachers, etc."

Procedure

The pre-survey was administered before the teacher candidates had participated in Book Club and before they were given any information about the school or the program. The post-survey was given at the completion of the semester after students had participated in Book Club.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed to determine if there was any difference between the Spring 2015 cohort and the Fall 2015 cohort, using an independent samples t-test on various combinations of the data, such as the mean response of the eight items in Spring versus Fall, the mean response of the positive items in Spring versus Fall, the mean response of the negative items in Spring versus Fall, etc. In every case, the p value was greater than .05; therefore there was not a statistically significant difference between the two cohorts. For the remainder of the analysis, we were then able to combine the Spring and Fall cohorts and analyze the data collectively.

For the bulk of the data analysis, paired samples t-tests were performed to determine whether the mean responses to the pre-survey items were significantly different from the mean responses to the items on the post-survey. Pre-survey versus post-survey mean responses on the positive items as a whole as well as on the negative items as a whole were examined. Each question was also examined individually via a paired samples t-test to see if the differences were significant at the .05 level. In the random cases where items on the surveys were left unanswered, we replaced the blank data point with the mean response of the item on that test.

Finally, participants' responses on the qualitative, open-ended questions of the pre-survey and post-survey were examined to help answer our research questions.

Results

Table 1 found in the Appendix shows pre-survey vs. post survey mean responses to questions asked of the teacher candidates. Significant differences were noted in the responses on individual items of the survey. As shown in Table 1, three items had statistically significantly differences in their mean responses on the pre-test compared to the post-test. Two were positive items and one was a negative item.

The first positively-stated item that subjects agreed with significantly more after participating in Book Club was question 7, "Urban schools are just as clean and well-kept as non-urban schools." The mean response to that question on the pre-survey was 3.03 with a standard deviation of 1.21. On the post-survey, the mean response increased to 3.63 with a standard deviation of 1.34. The p-value was less than .05.

The second positively-stated item with a statistically significant difference was question 8, which stated "Teachers at urban schools have adequate supplies for their classroom." On the pre-survey, participants marked a mean response of 2.81, with a standard deviation of 0.95. On the post-survey, the mean responses increased to 3.54 with a standard deviation of 1.21. The difference was statistically significantly different with a p-value of less than .01.

There was one negatively-stated question that the participants agreed with less after their time at Book Club. Question 5, "Urban neighborhoods are full of violence and crime," had a pre-survey mean of 2.13, with a standard deviation of 0.99, and a post-survey mean of 1.29, with a standard deviation of 1.02. The p-value was less than .01.

Discussion

According to the survey results, the teacher candidates who participated in the study had more positive views about some aspects of urban education after completing a semester of participation in Book Club. The three items that yielded statistically significant responses dealt with the cleanliness and upkeep of urban schools, the amount of resources afforded to teachers in urban schools, and the safety of urban neighborhoods. All of these changes were related to the physical and financial features of the urban school. What may have caused a significantly more positive view of urban education as it relates to these areas?

Not only were they in the school building, teacher candidates were also assigned to specific classrooms within the school. As part of the structure of Book Club, participants were

assigned to a different classroom in the school each week. They were allowed to arrange themselves in the tables and chairs and create a space that suits their lesson for the week. Generally, each teacher candidate was assigned his or her own classroom, and the assignment changed from week to week. This allowed the participants to spend an hour a week in brightly-decorated and appealing urban classrooms full of signs, textbooks, trade books, and supplies, and see that resources were, in fact, plentiful in this setting.

Another unique aspect of the program that may have led to the increased mean response to the question, "Teachers at urban schools have adequate supplies for their classroom" is that teacher candidates were able to borrow materials from the urban school to use in their lessons. If they requested them ahead of time, participants were given crayons, pencils, markers, construction paper, etc. for each student in their group. Being able themselves to use a variety of materials throughout the semester likely led the study participants to have a more favorable view of the amount of resources afforded to urban schools.

Finally, Book Club took place at an urban school in a neighborhood that does have a higher crime rate than the national average. Returning to this neighborhood repeatedly helped to reduce the fear of the unknown.

The open-ended pre-survey question asked participants to state their expectations for their urban placement, while the post-survey question asked them to reflect on how their expectations were challenged or confirmed by their placement. We were surprised to learn that many participants had years of experience in urban schools, perhaps even attending an urban school themselves. The following are a sample of some of the responses given by participants:

"For the most part I know what to expect out of an urban school because I went to an urban school for my elementary and high school career."

"My view has not changed. I have always wanted to teach in urban schools because I went to them myself."

"I've only been familiar with urban schools. My predictions were on target. "

"My views on urban education didn't change from the beginning of the semester. Being a student at an urban school, I knew what the culture was."

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the responses indicated that some participants did not have any prior, personal experience with urban schools. Examples of these types of responses include:

"I never have done any placements at an urban school before. ... Because I grew up going to a suburban school, I am most comfortable in that environment."

"Growing up in the suburbs, I wasn't faced with a lot of diversity"

"I am really excited to be teaching in an urban setting because it's something I've never experienced before."

"I have never been in urban school environment."

When we looked at the open-ended responses, it was clear that some students have plentiful experience in urban schools because they attended urban schools in elementary and high school. Others have no experience, stating that they grew up attending wealthier suburban schools. What these responses tell us is that some students did in fact have their misconceptions altered and came away with more positive views on urban education. So when they were asked to reflect on their own experiences, they saw in themselves a positive change in their attitudes. Some examples are as follows:

"My views on the school building, resources, students, families and teachers changed. ... I could see myself teaching in a setting like this school."

"I loved urban education. My thoughts changed completely and I was extremely happy."

Conclusions

This study expands on previous studies of teacher candidates' misconceptions of urban education (Aragon, Culpepper, Tiezzi & Cross, 1997; Bakari, 2003; Hampton, 2008; McKee & Perkins, 2014; Watson, 2011) by examining whether or not teacher candidates' perceptions could change after spending five weeks in a placement at an urban school with urban students in an authentic educational setting. According to the analysis of pre-survey responses and post-survey responses, the participants' views of the safety of urban neighborhoods, the cleanliness and upkeep of the schools, and the amount of resources available to urban teachers all changed in a statistically significant way to afford more positive views. This may have been due to the nature of the placement in that, as a Professional Development School partnership, it was held in urban school classrooms and allowed participants to use materials that were a part of the school. Other programs that want to impact teacher candidates' views of urban education should consider the value of providing experiences in authentic settings.

This last open-ended response from a preservice teacher participant summarizes the purpose for conducting this research:

> "At the beginning of the semester, I was definitely a little apprehensive about
> working with these students, mostly because I was worried they were going to be
> difficult to manage. A lot of people have stereotypes about urban schools, getting
> a lot of negative ideas from the media. The truth is doing Book Club at this school
> just reassured me even more of why I am taking this career path."

Limitations

It is important to note that only three questions yielded statistically significant results. . According to this survey, the participants did not change some of their views about the children who attended urban schools or their own attitudes toward urban education, including whether or not they would want to teach in an urban school. One possible explanation for the lack of change is that many of the teacher candidates in this study already had a contextualized view of urban education. More background on the demographics of participants would enable future research to take into account the subjects' prior experiences with urban education.

Table 1
Pre-Survey versus Post-Survey Mean Responses

Question	Pre-Survey $\mu(\sigma)$	Post-Survey $\mu(\sigma)$	p-value
1. I would prefer teaching in an urban school over a non-urban school. (+)	2.63 (1.42)	2.57 (1.38)	0.85
2. Urban schools are unsafe. (-)	1.45 (1.11)	1.12 (1.11)	0.28
3. Low income students can't learn. (-)	0.16 (0.68)	0.23 (0.62)	0.64
4. Students in urban schools are difficult to manage. (-)	2.16 (1.15)	2.09 (1.22)	0.74
5. Urban neighborhoods are full of violence and crime. (-)	2.13 (0.99)	1.29 (1.03)	<0.01**
6. Students in urban schools are difficult to teach. (-)	1.76 (1.36)	1.68 (1.35)	0.75
7. Urban schools are just as clean and well-kept as non-urban schools. (+)	3.03 (1.22)	3.63 (1.34)	0.04*
8. Teachers at urban schools have adequate supplies for their classrooms. (+)	2.81 (0.95)	3.54 (1.22)	<0.01**

Note: The eight positive items are denoted with (+) and the twelve negative items are indicated with (-).
μ = mean
σ = standard deviation
* = statistical significance at the 0.05 level
** = statistical significance at the 0.01 level

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