

# A STUDY OF GUIDED URBAN FIELD EXPERIENCES FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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## **Abstract:**

This research examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban schools and urban students before and after an 80-hour field experience in an urban K-12 district. The fieldwork placements were structured through a school-university partnership, and supported by university coursework. Quantitative data collected from 150 students over three semesters of a pre-and post-perceptions survey show statistical significance that a change in perceptions of pre-service teachers transpired regarding urban schools. Qualitative data collected from a post-fieldwork reflection paper further support the survey data. Results may have an impact on the manner in which teacher preparation programs address fieldwork placements in urban districts.

**Keywords:** teaching; urban teacher education; pre-service teachers; teacher education

## **Introduction**

Demographic trends show the greatest demand for teachers continues to be in urban schools, with diverse student populations (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2010). This information may directly influence teacher education programs to consider how to prepare pre-service teachers to effectively teach in urban environments. One solution may be in providing urban field placements for pre-service teachers. In a study of teacher preparation for diversity and urban field placements, Zeichner and Melnick (1996) called for an increase in pre-service teachers' placement in diverse settings, while Darling-Hammond (2002) supports the notion that a critical component of effective teaching should "consider students' lives, and preconceived notions pre-service teachers have of students" (p. 209).

Preparing pre-service teachers to be effective urban educators poses many challenges as a disparate difference in community and culture may exist between some pre-service teachers' experiences and those of their students (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016; Desimone, Bartlett, Gitomer, Mohsin, Pottinger, & Wallace, 2013; Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002).

Many pre-service teachers have limited opportunities to become culturally aware of how the education of urban students may be a different experience than the one they had in school (Hancock, 2011).

The role colleges of education assume in training pre-service teachers to work in urban environments is critical. Teacher education programs not offering direct experience in urban communities rely primarily on coursework in diversity in communities and schools, and focus on pedagogical methods to teach pre-service teachers to work with students in urban areas. Providing an urban field placement offers benefits beyond what is taught in college classrooms. Pre-service teachers should experience a culturally unfamiliar setting, which may create the potential for changes in perception, many times (but not always) for the better (del Prado Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, 2012, p. 82). Knowing students is a prerequisite to teaching well (Delpit, 2012).

This article describes one teacher education program in the northeastern United States that placed pre-service teachers in the first semester of a teacher education program in an 80-hour field placement in a local urban school district. Pre-service teachers were given one pre- and post-perceptions survey to determine if there was a change in perceptions of urban schools and students resulting from the 80-hours. For this study, the terms pre-service teachers and participants are synonymous.

## **Review of Literature**

A National Education Association (NEA) study in 2012 found that, "Teachers who spend their first year in higher-poverty schools are more likely to leave the profession than those who spend their first year in lower-poverty schools" (Long, 2015). Commonly cited reasons for this attrition include a lack of sufficient preparation to teach in an urban environment, as well as a lack of effective mentoring support (Waddell, 2010).

The sustainability of teachers who work in our most underserved populations is necessary to narrow the achievement gap that exists between students who are raised in high-income versus low-income areas. McKinney et al. (2006) suggested that to narrow the achievement gap, it is essential teachers understand culture and conditions, and “use this awareness to adapt pedagogical practices and methodologies so that they reflect students’ cultural references” (p. 2).

In a study on urban teachers who were interviewed about their coursework and training in preparing them for their jobs, interviewees who had field experiences in urban settings placed greater value on their fieldwork (Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002). They explained theory, readings, and discussion took on greater meaning when linked to actual practice (del Prado Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, 2012).

To be an effective educator in urban environments, teachers must see children beyond stereotypes by, “acknowledging and comprehending ways in which culture and content influence their lives and learning” (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 209). Schaffer, White, & Brown (2016) write, “Teachers should not only address how they think about curriculum and instruction, but also how they think about social context and their students” (p. 2). Nieto (2013) suggests teachers consider “attitudes and beliefs about their students, their relationships with them, and their knowledge about their families and backgrounds” (p. 20). Culture and context are important for all educators in all settings.

The discussion of race and culture should be infused into teacher education programs. Buchanan (2015) discussed the connection of race and culture to teacher education programs.

If teacher education programs are to present a more deliberate examination of race across courses, teacher educators must understand pre-service teachers’ beliefs about race and how to use this knowledge to provide a more focused and meaningful investigation of these concepts in their individual and collective teaching (p. 5).

Buchanan (2015) suggested teacher educators create courses and urban field placements, which include discussions on race and culture in the classroom. Providing additional opportunities for discourse may dispel some of the sensitivity in the discussion of race.

The completion of fieldwork hours for pre-service teachers must go beyond the time requirements, and involve university faculty, and collaboration with cooperating teachers. Darling-Hammond (2005) wrote how school placements not aligned with the mission of the teacher preparation program may present issues for the student-teacher, cooperating teacher and university faculty. This information is critical to teacher-educators in considering how to prepare pre-service teachers to effectively teach in urban environments.

While national accreditation boards such as The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, (CAEP, 2014) require students spend time in the field, there is no definition of how the experience is defined for pre-service teachers. Where one university may require 40 hours in the field, another may require 80, or 120 hours. The effectiveness of urban field placements, therefore, may rely on how they are structured, as well as how they are supported in the college classroom. The value of an urban field placement, in conjunction with paralleled course work may be greater than assigning students to an urban classroom without supporting their learning. Wiggins and Folio (1999) found that, “...simply placing candidates in an urban setting did not necessarily yield positive results” (p. 653-663).

In this study, before the first day of fieldwork, pre-service teachers were asked to consider their own cultural background, and what perceptions of urban schools and urban students may already exist. Based on their own experiences as students, middle class white pre-service teachers may have misperceptions of urban schools and urban students, and may initially consider the opportunity for urban field experiences with hesitation (del Prado Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, 2012). This supports the need for teacher education programs to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to work with urban children to change initial perceptions. Anderson & Stillman (2013) found that learning relies heavily on understanding the learners and the context and culture surrounding the learning environment.

Helping pre-service teachers understand what they are seeing in the classrooms, and how that may likely be different from their own upbringing is essential to a change in perceptions. Providing opportunities whereby pre-service teachers take existing knowledge of their own experience in schools, and add new knowledge of urban schools based on their fieldwork experience may create conflict. Festinger’s (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance described this change in thinking as a means to change perceptions (cognitions). With the guidance of faculty members, and required coursework, pre-service teachers can consider how they may resolve their conflicting thoughts (cognitive dissonance) by either changing their beliefs, actions, or perceptions of actions with regards to urban schools. This final step to action becomes the foundation on which teacher educators can then begin to teach candidates effective instructional strategies to use in the classroom.

Cognitive dissonance sets the stage for teachers to engage in professional reflection. According to Taylor (2009), critical

reflection is a distinguishing characteristic of adult learning which "refers to questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions, and beliefs" which is "often prompted in response to an awareness of conflicting thoughts, feelings, and actions..." (p. 7).

There is an abundance of research supporting effective pedagogical practices for teachers who work in urban classrooms. While this study does not contribute to existing research on pedagogy, it does contribute to a growing body of research (Milner, 2010; Nieto, 2013; White, Schaffer, & Brown (2015); del Prado, Hill, Phelps, 2012) supporting the need for pre-service teachers to understand themselves and the cultural lens through which they see the world. As Delpit (2012) believed, there is value in knowing who students are, before effective teaching practices can be implemented. Effective teachers can teach *in* urban environments without being *from* urban environments.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Learning Theory (SLT). Vygotsky posited the learning environment plays a central role in an individual's learning process, as well as the learners active participation (Anderson and Stillman, 2012, p. 3). Sociocultural learning theory considers how learners are initially impacted by social situations, which may further impact their ability to acquire information. Providing pre-service teachers an opportunity to complete fieldwork hours in an urban district is supported by SLT with active participation, which may have an impact on their perceptions of urban schools and the students who attend them.

Discussion of teaching effectively in urban environments must also include culturally responsive teaching (CRT) developed by Geneva Gay (2010). According to Gay, "Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). The application of culturally responsive teaching to teacher education and how to prepare pre-service teachers to be effective urban educators is direct. Teachers bring their own experiences, and frames of reference to the classroom. Providing field experience with ethnically diverse students supports how pre-service teachers can address any misperceptions of students who may not mirror their own cultural background and experiences.

Gay and Kirkland (2003) assert that culturally responsive teaching is crucial to teacher education programs.

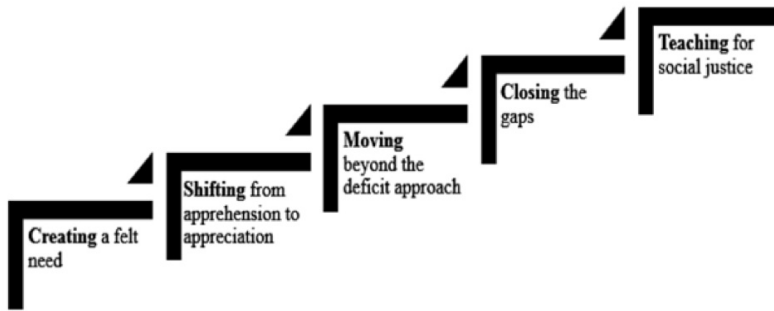
Our beliefs about the necessity of CRT are based on the premises that (a) multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected; (b) teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one's own teaching beliefs and behaviors; and (c) teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom (p. 57).

Teachers, including pre-service teachers, need to recognize how culture influences learning (Gay, 2010). This emphasizes the need for teacher education programs to focus on the cultural awareness of pre-service teachers. Social context and cultural identity should be viewed as assets, rather than impediments of learning in urban classrooms. Teaching must become more than a focus on what is being taught, and embrace a clear understanding of who is being taught.

In the context of teacher education, pre-service teachers explore the core tenets of sociocultural learning theory and culturally responsive teaching through the application of Festinger's (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Placing pre-service teachers who are predominately white and female into urban classrooms, where the majority of students are nonwhite, creates dissonance. What pre-service teachers think they know about an urban environment may conflict with what they see and experience in an urban classroom. A guided urban field placement provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to question and challenge existing perceptions of urban schools and urban students.

Pre-service teachers confront their cognitive dissonance related to urban educational settings by moving through and between a series of stages outlined in Figure 1 (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016). The notion is that pre-service teachers will progress through the stages differently as existing beliefs (original cognitions) of urban contexts are challenged by what may be contradictory information discovered and experiences encountered (new cognitions) during the urban field experiences. Dissonance is a recursive process whereby pre-service teachers reconsider their beliefs, and in doing so, reconsider their identity as urban teachers (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016).

### Figure 1- Stages of Cognitive Dissonance



During the first stage, Creating a Felt Need, pre-service teachers begin to understand the demand for teachers who teach students likely who have a background different than them. (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2010; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). In the second stage, Shifting from Apprehension to Appreciation, pre-service teachers reconsider their perceptions of urban schools as dangerous, run-down, or lacking particular assets, with a recognition of positive attributes and opportunities represented in urban school settings (Ladson-Billings, 2008; Milner, 2013; Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2017 in press). Once this appreciation is established, they conceptualize how assets of urban environments can enhance teaching and improve student learning. In the third stage, Moving Beyond the Deficit Approach, pre-service teachers advance beyond a deficit-driven view of teaching to one which considers how deficits become assets.

The dissonance experienced in the final two stages begins to confront the practices of social institutions (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016). In the fourth stage, Closing the Gaps, pre-service teachers understand how disparities outside the school environment impact academic achievement and opportunity of urban students (Irvine, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Kantor & Lowe, 2013; Gorski, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Rothstein, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013). In the final stage, Teaching for Social Justice, pre-service teachers develop an understanding of teaching, recognizing education impacts society and society impacts education (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016).

Festinger (1957) discussed resolving cognitive dissonance in three ways: changes in beliefs, changes in actions, and changes in perceptions of actions. Consider a pre-service teacher's old knowledge that urban schools are dangerous, violent, and nonacademic, (1<sup>st</sup> cognition), yet after a guided fieldwork experience, the same pre-service teachers are able to see students who want to learn, come to school to learn, and violence is not an issue in the classroom (2<sup>nd</sup> cognition). The incompatible ideas lead to dissonance in understanding what was originally known is different from what is now known. As a result of this conflict, pre-service teachers may change their beliefs of what an urban classroom looks like.

Cognitive dissonance allows for pre-service teachers to change existing beliefs and gain new knowledge, attitudes, and pedagogical practices to become culturally responsive teachers who recognize the importance of learning within the context of culture (Ladson-Billings, 2016). This study will show how pre-service teachers changed or expanded their beliefs about urban schools and urban students after a dedicated urban field placement.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine if an 80-hour guided fieldwork placement for pre-service teachers enrolled in a teacher education program would change perceptions of urban schools and students. For this study, urban was not solely defined by a population-based model, but also includes educational and/or academic achievement variables. Urban schools were considered underperforming schools with a high concentration of students living in poverty; students of color, and English Language Learners. The school district in this study was determined to be (socioeconomically) urban by the State Department of Education free and reduced lunch program data (NCES, 2016). Pre-service teachers were placed in one of the K-12 schools in the district, closely matching their area of certification. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the population of the city is 22% Caucasian, 33% African American, 28% Hispanic and 15% Asian. The average school test scores are 20% lower than the national average. Those who have completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade comprise 68.6% of the population, and those who have completed high school comprise 65.4% of the population (NCES, 2016).

A guided field placement, as defined by the university in this study includes the hours spent in a school classroom as well as the completion of fieldwork requirements, which were situated within an introductory fieldwork seminar. Students enrolled in the course were in the first of three semesters of the teacher certification program, and met four times over the semester to discuss course requirements, in addition to completing the 80-hour fieldwork requirement. Assignments related to the fieldwork

experience were completed independent of the seminars and discussed during seminars. Data collected included both quantitative (pre-post survey responses) and qualitative (statements from reflective essays)

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted during the academic year 2014-2015 at a mid-size liberal arts university located in the northeastern United States, with an enrollment of approximately 9000 undergraduate and graduate students. Participants were undergraduate students in their junior or senior years, as well as post-baccalaureate students returning for teacher certification. The age range was 18-45, with 80% of the participants identifying as female. One hundred fifty students (n=150) participated in the 80-hour urban field placement over three semesters. Of the 150 students who responded to the question; 92% self-identified as white/Caucasian, 0.08% African-American, and .06% Hispanic/Latino, 0.009% American Indian/Alaskan, and 0.009 Asian/Pacific Island.

Participants were enrolled in an introductory fieldwork seminar course, which met four times per semester to discuss fieldwork experiences and assignments. This course was taken in conjunction with a pedagogical course on practices and techniques of teaching. Three university faculty members facilitated the seminars, where all fieldwork students met monthly as a large group. Assignments (Appendix A, B) pertaining to the fieldwork were discussed in class, reviewed and graded by faculty. Three additional assignments were required of each pre-service teacher, and were more pedagogically focused. The first was a curriculum report, where participants identified a curriculum (elementary majors identify language arts and math curricula) area. In an analysis, participants look for alignment to National Common Core State Standards or State standard, consider materials used by the cooperating teacher, pacing guides, differentiation, and the role of testing in the classroom. A second assignment required for this course included a classroom management analysis project, which had participants identify various approaches to classroom management observed by their cooperating teacher. And finally, participants complete an assessment project where they log observations of three students from their observation class, collect data (assignments, tests, et. al) and write an analysis of their findings, and address how to meet the learning needs of each student.

The classroom/teacher assignments were made by the district administration, and situated in the same district, in one of the eleven P-8 schools or the high school. Each cooperating teacher was provided with a handbook explaining the roles and responsibilities of the university student, and the cooperating teachers. An explanation of course assignments was also provided to cooperating teachers.

While students may have had prior courses with a service-learning component, this 80-hour field experience was the first required fieldwork experience, taken concurrently with a pedagogical course in the teacher certification program. Participants were in their first of three semesters required by the state for certification. The second semester also requires 80-hours of fieldwork, not necessarily in an urban district. The third semester is student teaching, and students have the option to return to an urban district.

University faculty and staff visited the schools and classrooms for the purpose of fostering a collaborative relationship with cooperating teachers and administrators. These visits were not evaluative in nature. Emails were sent to cooperating teachers at the beginning, midterm, and the end of the semester. The emails reviewed what was expected of teachers in their role, and supported their work of engaging and challenging pre-service teachers in their classrooms. Cooperating teachers were asked via email to provide feedback (attendance, engagement, initiative) to the university at mid-semester, and at the end of the fieldwork experience with an electronic feedback form sent to each individual cooperating teacher.

### **Data Collection**

This study immersed pre-service teachers in a K-12 urban school district located in the northeastern United States. Data collection was based on a pre-and post-fieldwork survey, three guided assignments from the seminar course, and a reflective essay written at the end of term. Prior approval for the study's methodology, and use of participants was given through the university's Institutional Review Board. The survey was previously used for a similar study (Schaffer, Gleich-Bope, & Copich, 2014), and written permission was given by the authors to use the instrument for this study.

The pre-post survey consisted of 28 questions; the first 9 questions asked for demographic information. The remaining 19 questions used a four point Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) to respond to questions pertaining to perceptions of urban schools, students, and teachers.

Guided assignments supporting the fieldwork placement were discussed during the four seminars scheduled throughout the semester. The first assignment was a cultural autobiography (Appendix A). In this assignment, participants narrated, analyzed, and reflected on the deep-rooted cultural features of their cultural backgrounds. Participants were asked to move past the personal and concrete level of culture and into the abstract elements and experiences, as they relate to culture outside of their own. Effective teachers in urban schools must challenge their assumptions and perceptions of urban schools and students (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016). This critical reflection began with what participants know about themselves, and how that connected to what they bring to their classroom and their students. This assignment also incorporates the first stage of cognitive dissonance - Creating a Felt Need – in that it helped participants become aware of the importance of culture.

The second assignment was a contextual factors chart (Appendix B). Participants researched the urban city/school district to identify socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural resource information. The assignment was to research the information and to develop a chart representing the contextual factors that impact the school district where participants were placed for their fieldwork experiences, collect data by providing evidence of characteristics of the community, school district, and school, and the source of the data/evidence (e.g., Internet site, school handbook) relating to each characteristic. This assignment may allow students to begin to work through stage three - Move Beyond the Deficit Approach. Finally, participants discussed the implications of this data and why it is important to know these contextual factors as a teacher. This assignment has the potential to address a few of the stages of cognitive dissonance; Shifting from Apprehension to Appreciation, Moving Beyond the Deficit Approach, and Closing the Gap.

The third assignment was a reflective essay/fieldwork summary. Participants were asked to comment on what they learned—the value of the experience—and the impact it had on their desire to pursue teaching as a career. Questions participants considered for this essay included: What did you like about the experience? What did you not like about the experience? In comparing your pre-post perceptions, what surprised you about the school, the students, and the overall experience? Participants used these questions as a guide to writing the essay as they reflected on their experience. This assignment allowed students an opportunity to explain any changes in their thinking—the second stage of cognitive dissonance- Shifting from Apprehension to Appreciation.

### Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis of the three semesters consisted of responses to questions 9-28 of the pre-post- survey (questions 1-8 collected demographic information) (see Participants). The researcher entered response data into SPSS data analysis software, and compiled using paired t-statistics. Data analysis included participants’ changes in response from agree to strongly agree.

### Qualitative Data Analysis

At the end of the third semester (spring, 2015), qualitative data was analyzed using axial coding. The researcher along with two colleagues engaged in an analysis of the fieldwork summary/reflection paper, which informed the analysis. Sample statements demonstrating a shift in perceptions were grouped by the corresponding survey question, and are represented in Table 2. These statements do not represent the entirety of data collected.

## Findings

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected for the study. First, Table 1 shows the quantitative data analysis of pre- and post-program survey responses over three semesters. Next, in Table 2 statements from students’ fieldwork summary/reflection papers from the qualitative data analysis were aligned with survey questions.

**Table 1: Distribution and Paired t-statistics Indicating Measures from Pre- to Post- Experiment**

Table 1. Distribution and Paired t-statistics Indicating Measures from Pre- to Post- Experiment (N=150)

Item	Pre-Test Scores	Post-Test Scores	Paired t-statistics

	St. Agree	St. Agree	Mean	St. Agree	St. Agree	Mean	Mean	Diff
I feel comfortable in K-12 school settings.	55.33	40.00	3.35	41.33	58.67	3.59	0.24	4.91***
I feel comfortable in K-12 urban school settings.	50.34	18.79	2.86	58.67	38.00	3.35	0.49	7.68***
I have an accurate perception of K-12 schools.	71.80	15.40	3.03	56.67	40.67	3.38	0.35	6.4***
I have an accurate perception of K-12 urban schools.	46.31	8.72	2.62	56.38	39.60	3.36	0.74	12.4***
My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by my own experiences.	55.33	36.00	3.27	44.59	49.32	3.43	0.16	2.33**
My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by the media.	25.30	1.30	2.09	9.33	2.00	1.89	-0.20	3.49**
My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by past college course work.	43.62	2.68	2.41	52.00	7.33	2.63	0.22	3.11**
My perception of K-12 urban schools is most influenced by my own experiences.	40.94	16.11	2.64	52.70	41.89	3.36	0.72	8.75***
My perception of K-12 urban schools is most influenced by the media.	36.67	8.00	2.39	14.97	2.72	1.97	-0.42	5.62***
My perception of K-12 urban schools is most influenced by past college course work.	38.26	4.70	2.38	47.30	13.50	2.72	0.34	4.28***
I understand the opportunities for teachers in urban school settings.	60.40	14.77	2.89	51.33	44.00	3.39	0.50	8.11***
I understand the challenges for teachers in urban school settings.	58.00	29.33	3.16	33.60	66.40	3.66	0.50	9.1***
I understand the opportunities for K-12 students in urban school settings.	57.05	14.77	2.85	46.30	46.30	3.39	0.54	8.35***
I understand the challenges for K-12 students in urban school settings.	57.14	24.49	3.05	40.90	59.10	3.59	0.54	7.88***
If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to build effective rapport with my students.	48.00	12.80	2.71	54.40	42.90	3.40	0.69	10.67***
If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds.	48.30	14.80	2.76	55.03	40.27	3.36	0.60	9.7***
If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to teach students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.	54.67	12.00	2.78	51.35	46.62	3.45	0.67	11.9***

I feel my teacher preparation program has prepared me to meet the needs of students in urban school settings. 52.35 10.07 2.70 48.99 45.64 3.40 0.70 9.91\*\*\*

I would like to student teach in an urban school setting. 31.50 10.70 2.47 46.00 20.67 2.84 0.37 5.7\*\*\*

I am likely to apply for a teaching position in an urban school district. 35.33 12.00 2.53 51.33 19.33 2.87 0.34 4.85\*\*\*

*Note.* Mean score is based on 4-Point Scale where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree; \*\*\*  $p < 0.000$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Findings represent a definite shift in participants' perceptions of urban cities, schools, teachers, and students whereby statistical significance was achieved. For example, in looking at the first two questions pertaining to a level of comfort in a K-12 setting and a K-12 urban setting, the shift is significant that students came out of the experience with a more favorable level of confidence for both settings. Further examples of the influence the fieldwork experience had can be seen in students' comfort with the setting, and especially with their own self-reflection of whether they would feel prepared to teach in an urban environment.

Qualitative data further supports the impact of the fieldwork experience on changing pre-service teachers' perceptions. Table 2 shows participants' responses aligning with the survey questions, asking specifically about the urban setting.

**Table 2: Examples of Statements from Fieldwork Summary/Reflections**

**1. I feel comfortable in K-12 urban school settings.**

"I now feel like I would be comfortable teaching in an urban area, and I would absolutely take the opportunity to do so."

"This experience changed my outlook on teaching in urban districts and it was one of the best experiences of my life."

**2. I have an accurate perception of K-12 urban schools.**

"In comparison with my initial thoughts about this urban school, it was evident that I had perceived this experience entirely wrong."

**3. My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by my own experiences.**

"Everyone makes {city} out to be so much worse than it is."

**4. My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by the media.**

"My preconceived notions about the school and the students I should encounter stemmed from my own lack of understanding and knowledge, the influence of the media and popular opinion."

**5. My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by past college course work**

"Before this experience, I had a very limited perspective of urban school districts, and never once considered or ruled out the opportunity to work in said district. My views are limited to the inspirational teaching novels and films I have read and seen in class."

**6. My perception of K-12 urban schools is most influenced by the media.**



"The media portrays the city as such a horrible place, but there are wonderful people living in the city who are trying to make a difference."

**7. I understand the opportunities for teachers in urban school settings.**

"I learned that to be a good teacher, you have to teach more than just content, you have to teach life values and everything else."

"In all districts; urban, rural, and suburban there are going to be students who come from exceptional circumstances. To assume a child is lazy, does not care, or unable is the worst thing one can do as an educator."

**8. I understand the challenges for teachers in urban school settings.**

"My cooperating teacher was a mediator, dealing with drama. She was also like a second mother; dealing with tummy aches and tired students."

"Being able to observe in a low-income school district opened my eyes to challenges not only that the students go through, but what the district, schools, and teachers have to overcome as well."

**9. I understand the opportunities for K-12 students in urban school settings.**

"The children I got to interact with on a daily basis were great kids who, although most of them come from hard times and rough backgrounds, they always came to school willing to learn and put for their best effort."

**10. I understand the challenges for K-12 students in urban school settings.**

"I understand that many of the students I worked with were underprivileged, but they did not let that define them"

"I understand that students in urban districts present unique challenges, and have a great deal to teach the prospective teacher, just as much as I believe I could teach them."

"I assumed this school was going to be old and underfunded, and was happily surprised to find how new everything was. In recent years, budget cuts had been made but the school is always running fundraisers in order to make up for this deficit."

**11. If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to build effective rapport with my students.**

"I truly believe the biggest barrier between teaching and learning at a high level is the mistrust and relationships between teachers and students. I observed that {teacher} seemed to have a way with kids that allowed the students to be themselves and have freedom but the classroom was also structured and disciplined when it came time to work."

**12. If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds.**

"I never reflected on different cultures I have experienced until I went through this semester in {city}. I am now more aware of this component."

**13. If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to teach students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.**

"The number one take away from this experience is to learn my students and learn the ways they learn, and what factors affect their learning. By knowing my students I will be able to promote educational and future success."

**14. I feel my teacher preparation program has prepared me to meet the needs of students in urban school settings.**

"I would love to have the opportunity to work in an urban area, and I now feel I would be completely comfortable doing so."

"My experience at {school} also showed me the importance of everything that we are learning in the education program."

"The reason my field experience at {university} was superior was because not only was I learning new things each week, but I was then expected to apply what I learned while in the field immediately."

**15. I would like to student teach in an urban school setting.**

"I plan to return to {city} for my final fieldwork semester, and may consider working in a similar district."

**16. I am likely to apply for a teaching position in an urban school district.**

"I would be happy to work in an urban school district"

"I remember on the survey we took before completing our fieldwork, I said I did not have any desire to teach in an urban area and that I did not feel comfortable teaching in an urban area. By having the valuable experience of working with students of {school}, that feeling has completely changed."

"Being in {city} has only further reinforced my choice to be a teacher in an urban school district."

"Prior to this experience I did not believe I could ever see myself teaching in an urban environment; however, I now feel confident that I am capable and willing to enter an urban district. In fact, I may even prefer to work in a district such as {city} based on the positive experiences I had with the students."

Many statements noted in Table 2 provide evidence of participants' moving through the stages of cognitive dissonance (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2016). Participants moved within and around the stages at their own rate, often questioning and challenging their perceptions along the way. Below, the stages of cognitive dissonance are represented, with participant comments in support. The first three stages help pre-service teachers challenge their assumptions and perceptions and learn more about students. The last two stages externalize cognitive dissonance and begin to confront similar issues within the greater community.

### **Creating a Felt Need**

Participants in this stage recognize the importance of good teaching in an urban environment. One participant noted that to be a good teacher, "you have to teach more than just content, you have to teach life values and everything else." Another student recognized the demands for teaching are different from her own experiences. "I also heard a lot about the fears that some of the students live with every day. Like getting home safely, or wondering where their next meal is going to come from. Not knowing what any of that feels like can make it hard to relate to the students, but it also makes you not want to give up on them."

### **Shifting from Apprehension to Appreciation**

In this stage, participants note the shift in their perceptions of urban schools and students. Many students expressed hesitation and fear when learning about the fieldwork placement in an urban school district, and many students then show much growth at the end of the experience. "I was reluctant to go to {city} at one point because I felt that it was not necessary to go to an urban area if you did not want to. Now, I feel completely different. The experience has been eye-opening in a positive way. It showed me a different perspective to teaching, students, and administration." At the end of the fieldwork experience, one student wrote how it was a positive experience, but had a different outcome for her; "I really enjoyed my time observing in an urban school setting, however I do not think I can see myself teaching in this setting. I often found myself feeling out of place and felt as if many eyes were watching me because I physically looked like I did not belong there. This was also a profound moment for me

because for the first time I was the minority in a setting and I was feeling (what I think) almost all minorities feel.”

### **Moving Beyond the Deficit Approach**

In this stage, participants identified with the challenges and opportunities when working with students in urban areas. In the words of one participant, “I understand that many of the students I worked with were underprivileged, but they did not let that define them” Another participant said, “I realized that being a teacher in an urban school district, is not limited to educating students, but necessitates constant advocacy and a relentless lobbying against administrative and political roadblocks to sensible education reform.”

### **Closing the Gaps**

Participants realized factors outside of school impact student achievement, the field experience provided ample evidence underscoring their pre-existing suppositions. One participant said, “The media portrays the city as such a horrible place, but there are wonderful people living in the city who are trying to make a difference.”

### **Teaching for Social Justice**

Participants demonstrated a shift in perceptions when they recognized the potential power of an individual teacher to impact society. “Being able to observe in a low-income school district opened my eyes to challenges not only that the students go through, but what the district, schools, and teachers have to overcome as well.” In recognizing the impact teachers have, one participant said, “After this experience, it is my firm believe that the key to improve and reform education lies not with politicians and administrators, but with the collective and individual competency of the classroom teacher.”

As participants progressed through the guided field experience and the stages of cognitive dissonance, they recognized the perceptions they once held may not have been accurate. There was a realization of the importance of balancing empathy with academic expectations for students who may live in difficult conditions. This allowed them to move beyond the deficit approach - a common perception of urban students. “I never reflected on different cultures I have experienced until I went through this semester in {city}. I am now more aware of this component.” With guidance, participants moved at their own pace through the stages, coming out with many changes in thinking. One student noted a new level of cultural competence after the experience, “While completing my observations in {city} this semester, I was given the opportunity to interact with students stemming from a variety of cultural backgrounds. I learned about my student’s culture, as well as the importance of implementing culturally relevant material in the classroom.” Through the 80-hour fieldwork placement, and the guided assignments, the shift was noted by one participant, “This experience changed my outlook on teaching in urban districts and it was one of the best experiences of my life.”

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Learning Theory notes how social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Many of the shifts in thinking for participants came as a result of the fieldwork experience. Dedicated fieldwork hours in an urban classroom provided the opportunity for this social interaction.

Culturally responsive teaching embeds cultural knowledge and prior experiences of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective. (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Data support how this fieldwork experience benefitted students by providing direct classroom experience to create an opportunity to understand the culture and context of learning in an urban school. A shift in thinking occurred, and is supported in this study. One participant addressed CRT, “The number one take away from this experience is to learn my students and learn the ways they learn, and what factors affect their learning. By knowing my students, I will be able to promote educational and future success.” As Delpit (2012) said, knowing students is teaching them well.

Using theoretical sampling and based on the quantitative data, as well as the qualitative support, the evidence is clear that a guided field experience for pre-service teachers in an urban school district may be effective in changing perceptions of urban schools and the students who attend them. Changes in perceptions are not always positive; however, in this study data supports a positive shift for most participants. Data collection over three semesters showed the consistency of the positive outcomes of the urban fieldwork placement. Responses from students’ fieldwork summaries/reflections support the findings from the survey data.

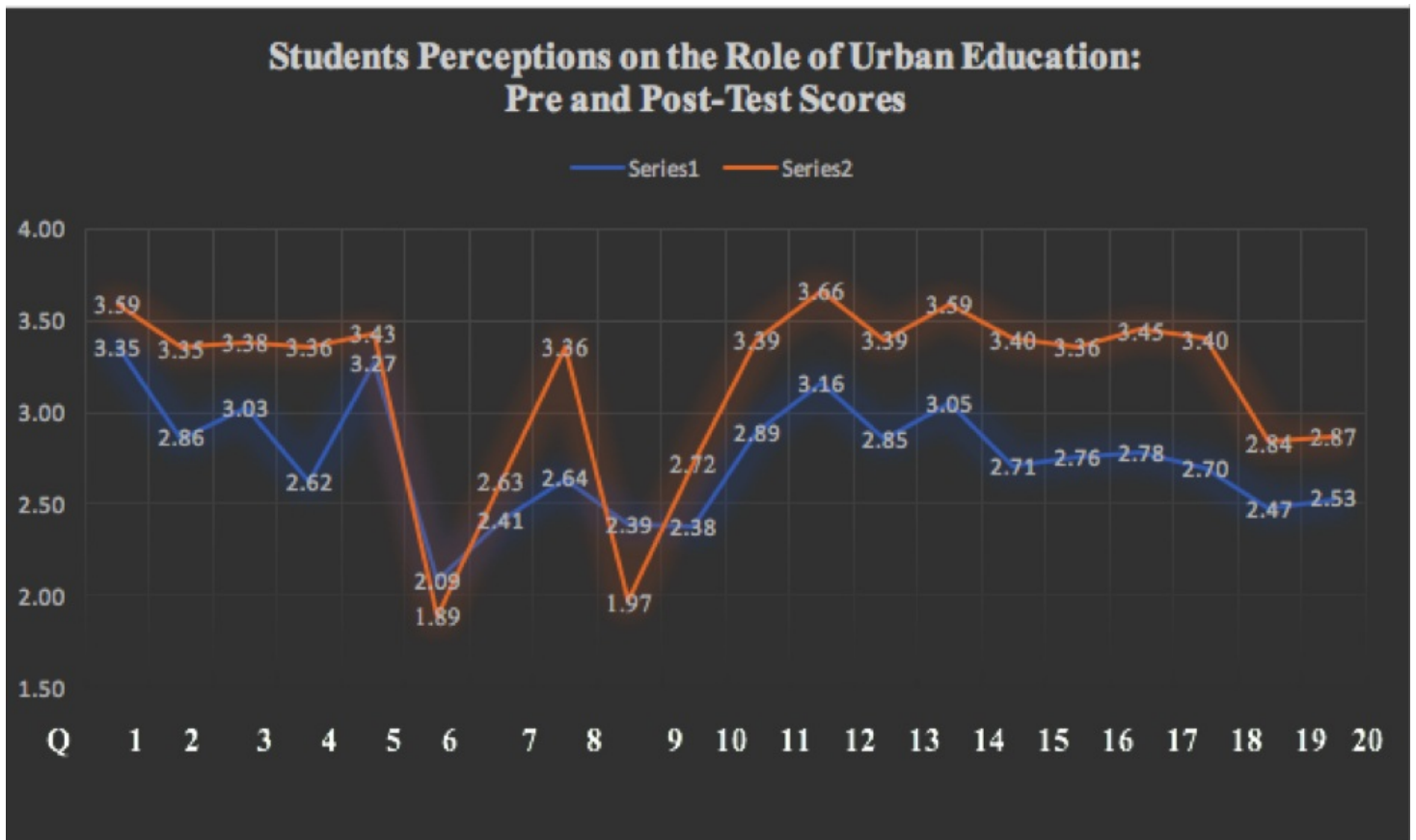
The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance is supported in data collected from the pre- and post perceptions survey administered to participants. Students entered the school, bringing their own personal experiences, which may have differed from the

experiences of the students attending the schools. Data revealed many students changed their beliefs of urban schools and urban students, most often positively.

Results further revealed the level of significance participants' perceptions changed after spending 80-hours in an urban classroom. Notable in the results is the response to the question specifically focused on perceptions of urban schools. Question 11, *I have an accurate perception of K-12 urban schools*, clearly shows what students thought they knew prior to the experience changed after the experience (mean difference 0.74). In another example, question 28, *I am likely to apply for a teaching position in an urban school district*, with a mean difference of 0.37 strongly supports that after the field experience, students not only felt more comfortable in an urban classroom, but also changed their opinions as to whether they saw themselves teaching in an urban environment.

Figure 2 shows pre- and post-survey scores on students' perceptions. Achieving statistical significance consistently over three semesters supports the value of, as well as the continued need for teacher education programs to provide a guided urban fieldwork experience in a school district where the majority of students come from low-income, underrepresented families. With the pressure on teacher education programs to produce graduates who will be effective educators in urban environments, a structured urban field experience is essential to this goal. There are similar studies, which support how an urban field experience paralleled with college coursework is more effective than just a stand-alone field experience (del Prado Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, 2012). Additionally, a study conducted by Schaffer, Gleich-Bope, & Copich (2014) produced comparable findings.

**Figure 2: Students Perceptions on the Role of Urban Education: Pre- and Post- Test Scores(n~150)**



### Implications/Limitations

Gay and Kirkland (2003) wrote of CRT, "Teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom" (p. 57). In order to prepare pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive teachers, providing opportunities to spend structured time in urban classrooms should be a focus of all teacher education programs. This study supports the success of such a program in a collaborative partnership with a university and an urban district in the northeastern United States.

Festinger's (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance is key to pre-service teachers' changing perceptions of urban schools and

urban students. Existing knowledge combined with new knowledge based on an 80-hour fieldwork experience created dissonance in the predominately white, female pre-service teachers. As Festinger suggested, from dissonance comes changes in beliefs, changes in actions, or changes in perceptions of actions.

One limitation of this study is it was done in one university, and in one urban district. Further studies can be considered in other parts of the US, with different universities perhaps representing different demographics. While this study presented statistical significance, the replication of a study elsewhere would support the need for more teacher education programs to include urban field placements, as a requirement for certification.

Another limitation of the methodology of this study is that data collection through Survey Monkey required students to enter their names. Consideration should be given in future studies to allow students to remain anonymous.

## Conclusion

Two statements on the survey help sum up this study, "If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to teach students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds." (mean difference of 0.67), and "I feel my teacher preparation program has prepared me to meet the needs of students in urban school settings", (mean difference of 0.70). These statements support the success of the urban field placement, which when paralleled with coursework in the university classroom can influence changes in perceptions. Students reflected on themselves, their own cultural upbringing, as well as experience teaching students in an urban classroom. The fieldwork combined with university coursework offers a rich, experiential learning experience for pre-service teachers.

If teacher educators work to change pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban schools and the student who attend them, further research can track how many students take jobs in urban districts after having had an urban field placement in their teacher preparation program, and note the impact of the field placement. Ultimately whether students choose to work in an urban classroom after their teacher certification program, an urban field experience allows pre-service teachers to make a more informed decision, which in turn may support the sustainability of teachers who work in urban classrooms.

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## Appendix A: Cultural Autobiography

Many educators around the country are interested in developing a multicultural approach in their teaching. They find themselves in classroom with 25 children of varying racial and cultural backgrounds and are looking for ways to connect what they do in the classroom to the cultures represented by their students. Before we can begin to understand others, however, we need to understand ourselves, and what we bring to our interactions with others. For this reason, it is important for teachers interested in learning more about others to first look at themselves.

Our culture provides a lens through which we see the world and interpret our everyday experiences. In this assignment, you will narrate, analyze and reflect on the deep-rooted cultural features of your backgrounds. Try to move past the concrete level of culture and into the abstract elements and experiences. As you plan, think of this paper as having 3 parts: narrative, analysis and reflection.

- First, **narrate** the experiences you consider of significance in shaping your worldview. You may include typical and/or exceptional events from your childhood, school years, religious life, family life, memorable encounters with individuals of various backgrounds, etc. You may also want to think about how your race, ethnicity, class, family background, religious beliefs and gender may have shaped your life thus far. Rather than providing a “laundry list” of experiences and elements of your identity, choose those that are most salient to your future as an educator or are most interesting to you. The following questions might help as you think of some things to write about.
  - How does the neighborhood you live in (or lived in) illuminate distinctions in socio-economic status, racial diversity, or other aspects of diversity?
  - What experiences have you had with racism or other forms of discrimination in your life in school, your family, or other contexts?
  - How were gender roles defined for you in your upbringing or during a certain life experience (i.e. sports or extracurricular activities)? Were there different expectations for women/men in your family or in other contexts?
  - How did/does your native language impact your schooling experiences or interactions with native English speakers?
  - What experiences have you had in life or in school that may have contributed to a deficit view of other cultures, races, genders, religions, etc.?
  - What experiences have you (or someone you know) had with racism or other forms of discrimination?
  - How have you been raised or schooled in a way that promotes only the “mainstream” culture?
  - How does your ability or disability impact your experiences in school or in other contexts?
- Second, **analyze** how these events and elements of your identity have shaped your culture, or standards for thinking, valuing, behaving and evaluating **Interpret** the cultural meanings of your experiences. Respond to these overarching questions: *So, what do these experiences mean? How have they shaped who I am and the way(s) that I understand the world? What implications have these experiences had on me?*
- Finally, **reflect** on the process of writing the cultural autobiography. What has this process helped you to discover about your identity and your future as a teacher? As you reflect, you might consider the following questions:
  - How do our values influence our attitudes toward children?
  - How do we think about differences in children, and do we implicitly relate difference to deficiency?
  - Do we think all children can learn?
  - How will writing this autobiography impact your work as an educator?

## Appendix B: Contextual Factors Chart

### Directions: What do I know about the community, district and school?

(1) Complete the **Data/Evidence** column by providing, in bulleted form, data/evidence for 16 characteristics of the community, school district, and school.

(2) Complete the **So What?** column by providing, in bulleted form, implications for why knowing the data/evidence is important to

you as a teacher.

(3) Complete the **Source(s)** column by providing the source(s) of the data/evidence (e.g., Internet site, school handbook, from your coop. teacher).

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Data/Evidence</b>	<b>So What?</b>	<b>Source(s)</b>
<b>C</b> Geographic location			
<b>C</b> Community population (by gender, race/ethnicity, and age)			
<b>C</b> Employment			
<b>C</b> Cultural resources			
<b>C</b> Community-based organizations (e.g., religious & social)			
<b>C</b> Overall crime rates			
<b>D</b> Socioeconomic profile (median income, % living in poverty, educational background)			
<b>D</b> School district population (by gender, race/ethnicity, and age)			
<b>D</b> District factor group (DFG)			
<b>D</b> Number and level of schools in district			
<b>S</b> School population (by gender, race/ethnicity, and age)			
<b>S</b> School AYP Status (3 years)			
<b>S</b> Grade levels and # of classes at each level			
<b>S</b> Pupil: Teacher Ratio			
<b>S</b> Academic support programs (ELL, Basic Skills, G&TE, after-school programs, Special Needs)			
<b>S</b> Extracurricular programs (clubs, athletics)			



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C=community

D=district

S=school

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