Supporting the Future: Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers in Urban Middle Schools

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role of cooperating teachers (CTs)/mentors in supporting pre-service teachers in urban middle schools. This article examines stories of ten middle school teachers at Baldwin Middle School, located in a mid-Atlantic urban center, who served as CTs in the Spring of 2016. After comparing the mentors' experiences, four major themes emerged that focus on preparing urban and middle-level pre-service teachers: culturally responsive pedagogy, classroom management, flexibility, and resources. This article describes the qualities of mentorship that are unique to urban middle schools, and how CTs can prepare future educators to effectively teach in this environment.

Two school types have consistently been stigmatized in America: middle and urban schools. Negative perceptions of middle school students (O'Connor & D'Angelo, 2013), urban students (NCES, 1996), and urban schools (Schneider, 2017) have contributed to the proportionally higher teacher turnover rate in both middle (Marinell, 2011) and high-poverty urban schools (Lindqvist, Nordänger, & Carlsson, 2014). Therefore, teacher educators must consider the most effective ways to prepare middle-level and urban teachers.

To support the preparation of effective middle school teachers, associations like the Association for Middle-Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association) created their This We Believe essential attributes and 16 characteristics for educating young adolescents (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). This framework is used in many of the 300-plus specialized middle-level teacher preparation programs across the country (Howell et al., 2016). Additionally, publications like Middle School Journal and Contemporary Issues in Middle-Level Education have helped bridge the theory and practice to help better prepare middle-level educators.

Many urban teacher preparation programs across the country and research journals such as Urban Education and Perspectives on Urban Education lead the way in preparing urban teachers and analyzing how to support urban schools and communities. However, the narrative about teacher preparation in urban schools continues to focus on how many new teachers, who are predominantly White and middle class, are ill-prepared to teach in high-poverty urban schools that are comprised of ethnically and racially diverse students (Banks, 2015; Farkas, Johnson, &

Foleno, 2000). Therefore, there has been a need to have teacher preparation programs provide additional support to help preservice teachers prepare to work in diverse settings (Banks, 2015; Villegas, 2007).

While extensive research has been done on preparing middle-level and urban teachers best, there is a gap in how best to prepare the intersection of middle-level and urban teachers. This article focuses on cooperating teachers (CTs)/mentors' role in supporting preservice teachers' preparation in urban middle schools.

Literature Review

Role of Mentors in Teacher Preparation Programs
Dedicated mentors willing to help students grow in knowledge and experience are imperative if education programs want to prepare strong teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011). Jacobi (1991) defines five characteristics that mentors must have in order to leave a positive impact on future teachers: (1) a willingness to share knowledge; (2) emotional, physiological support and role modeling; (3) both the mentor and mentee derive benefits; (4) involves ample direct interaction; and (5) emphasizes the mentor's experiences and achievements in order to influence the mentee. These qualities address the constant communication between the cooperating teacher and student teacher and the importance of providing honest feedback, which will ultimately benefit future teachers (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005).

Ideally, mentors provide opportunities for observation, curricular development, and teaching so their preservice teachers can deepen their content and pedagogical knowledge and improve their teaching (Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1985). Mentors recognizing the benefits of the mentor/mentee relationship and experience have increased the number of willing mentors for educational practicums (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985). Through this experience, mentors learn from their mentees just as much as mentees learn from their mentors. For instance, mentors often learn new strategies from their student teachers they can incorporate into their classroom by utilizing new technology and resources (Ackley & Gall, 1992; Loche, 1996), while mentees are supported in the development of culturally responsive teaching pedagogy. Overall, the role of each mentor is crucial, and their responsibilities shift based on the context in which they are teaching and preparing preservice teachers.

Uniqueness of Middle School Teacher Preparation
Most teacher candidates overlook the possibility of teaching in middle schools (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017; Hudson, 2012; Vizenor, 2017). Vizenor (2017) suggests that preservice teachers should be prepared for middle-level education through more practicum time, modeling, and classes explicitly tailored toward middle school teaching. This would allow future

educators to learn and practice the tricks needed to connect with middle school students, and in turn, preservice teachers would more likely look for jobs at the middle level. Additionally, college courses should include teaching strategies that can be especially useful for middle-level teachers (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2003; Vizenor, 2017). For example, college professors can integrate culturally relevant music and celebrate preservice teacher birthdays to "increase the sense of community" (Vizenor, 2017).

Allowing preservice teachers to roleplay early adolescents in a college classroom may help them better understand what strategies attract middle-level students (Vizenor, 2017). Further, courses need to be tailored to educate future teachers on developing a developmentally appropriate (Cook, Faulkner & Howell, 2016) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) that can be applied to the needs of middle school students in different settings. Involving preservice teachers in an authentic middle school setting that "mirrors middle-level philosophy as taught in the course is critical to influencing teacher candidates toward middle grades teaching" (Vizenor, 2017, p. 36).

Teachers realize preservice teachers "must have firsthand knowledge of the adolescent age group they will be teaching" (Loche, 1996, pg 7) to prepare them to teach in different grade levels like middle school. After being placed in a middle school practicum, an important first step is for mentors to model how to create a positive classroom community and culture, which particularly impacts middle school students (Author, 2017a; Author, 2017b). According to Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004), if "middle-school students perceive their teachers as caring and supportive, they are more likely to be academically motivated, to engage in classroom activities, and to behave in prosocial, responsible ways" (pg. 34).

Teacher mentors must also demonstrate how to develop and execute culturally responsive lessons and cultivate a safe classroom environment where students feel encouraged to engage with class material (Author, 2017a; Author, 2017b). For instance, Ericka Streeter-Adam, a teacher highlighted in Gutierrez's (2021) book on designing a culturally sustaining curriculum, noted the positive impact of introducing a curriculum rooted in the intellectual tradition of her students:

From the onset, you could see the curiosity arise in my scholars' eyes and the pride they exuded by knowing and feeling connected to the discourse. As opposed to students being the audience of a stale and stagnant lecture, within this curricular paradigm, they have become the "experts," leveraging their cultural insight, awareness, and wonderings. The schools value the discussions, and the tasks have taken on a new life. The controversial tone has become more universal and relevant, and owned by each individual scholar. In this culturally equitable environment, we have leveraged the community of thinkers. It feels like a cultural and academic rebirth (pg. 6).

Often middle school students are placed in classes with a range of abilities and interests that should be considered equally by the district curriculum, administrators, and teachers. Developing culturally responsive units, lessons, and activities will prepare preservice teachers for the unique needs of middle school students. Preservice teachers need to gain middle-level-specific pedagogical knowledge and application in both the college classroom and middle school practicum to prepare to serve middle-level students based on their needs.

Uniqueness of Urban School Teacher Preparation

Teachers in an urban environment are responsible for helping students discover the intersection between their cultural background and content (Author, 2017a; Author, 2017b), as most urban teachers and curricula do not reflect the background of urban students. Reflectiveness and sensitivity to the needs of students within an urban school district can ultimately create an environment where students are engaged in the curriculum and eager to learn more (Martell, 2013). Intensive field-based experience in an urban area "has the potential to adjust teachers' previously held perceptions about a diverse student population" (Garza & Harter, 2016, pg 403). Through an extended practicum, preservice teachers can familiarize themselves with the community and students with varied backgrounds, which will help them develop a culturally responsive pedagogy (Garza & Harter, 2016).

Often, teachers that unexpectedly end up in urban districts feel that their teacher preparation programs did not train them enough to work in an urban setting (Albright, Glasgow, Safer, Sekulich, Sims, Tagaris, & Zaharis, 2017; Garza & Harter, 2016). The lack of preparation is visible to administrators in urban districts who feel like newer teachers have limited experience with urban students and therefore do not have the necessary skills to connect with and engage their students who come from different backgrounds than their own (Albright, Glasgow, Safer, Sekulich, Sims, Tagaris, & Zaharis, 2017). Since these teachers cannot form connections with their students or administrators, they seek jobs in other districts (Haynes, Maddock & Goldrick, 2014). Then, new and eager educators take their place, and the cycle repeats (Albright, Glasgow, Safer, Sekulich, Sims, Tagaris, & Zaharis, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Haynes, Maddock, & Goldrick, 2014).

While there is significant research on middle-level and urban teacher preparation, there is a dearth of information on urban middle school teacher preparation. This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature on urban middle school teacher preparation by identifying the qualities of mentorship that are unique to preparing teachers to work in urban middle schools.

Methods
Case Study Site
To examine this gap in the research, we conducted a case study analysis of ten middle school teachers at Baldwin Middle School, located in a mid-Atlantic urban center, who served as

cooperating teachers during the same semester in the Spring of 2016. Baldwin was a traditional middle school when the study took place. At the time of the study, the typical enrollment was between 400 and 500 students. It is a Title I school with almost entirely Black and Hispanic students. Baldwin was an overflow school where students outside of the residential zone could be sent if the other middle schools in the district are full. The school has since become a 1-1 technology school; however, integration and application of this initiative have taken time. The culture and climate at Baldwin are positive, with consistent leadership from Principal Irving, who has been in that role for over a decade after attending the same school as a student years earlier. Baldwin is considered a priority school because of its low state test scores. Therefore, the school and students are mandated state-prescribed curricula, take benchmark assessments, and have additional state-assigned coaches for administration and teachers.

Participants
The semester this study took place, ten teachers at Baldwin volunteered to mentor preservice teachers. For most of these teachers, it was their first time as a cooperating teacher (CT). Each Baldwin CT voluntarily opted into this study.

Data Gathering
To determine what each CTs valued in supporting the preparation of preservice teachers working in an urban middle school, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher. These interviews assessed their teaching background, why they teach in an urban middle school, their perspectives on the role of being a CT, and how they supported their preservice teacher to work in an urban middle school effectively. Four of the teachers were interviewed a month into their role as a CT, and then after the experience ended, six teachers only engaged in interviews after the semester. As well five of the teachers kept journals of their experiences as CT. Each teacher was then contacted with follow-up questions after completing their interviews and/or journals via email. After collecting the data, each interview was transcribed, coded for themes, and compared to journal and email data.

Analysis & Discussion
While speaking with the CTs at Baldwin, they focused on specific themes to support preservice teachers: culturally responsive pedagogy, flexibility, and resources. The following sections highlight strategies and advice the CTs deemed important for preservice teachers within urban middle schools.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
Various field placements allow preservice teachers to develop a pedagogy that can be modified between contexts (Nucci et al., 2015; Vizenor, 2017). Developing a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) prepares preservice teachers for working in an urban middle school, as most new teachers feel like they need to prepare to teach in an urban setting (Albright et al., 2017).

Two CTs at Baldwin, Ms. Caster and Ms. Mantle, echoed these sentiments. They believed preservice teachers should experience placements in urban schools to understand the lives of urban students and, as a result, adjust their teaching styles according to the situations urban students face, the surroundings to which they are exposed, and the culture(s) they embody.

To be effective with CRP in an urban middle school, Ms. Simon explained that educators have to teach "the skills, the student, the content, and [they] have to meet them where they are." Ms. Simon found that students go home each day and may have other responsibilities to take care of before considering their school work. So each school day, if the students forget their homework or need to review the lesson from a previous class, the teacher should be understanding; patience is key as an educator within an urban middle school. By repeating various skills and content materials, Ms. Simon continued, students will begin to absorb information at their own pace. In essence, as Ms. Caster stressed, students need their basic needs met first, which is a reality teachers will only understand once in the field. Preservice teachers need support for these adjustments through modeling and coaching (Albright et al., 2017). With the help of supportive CTs, preservice teachers can mold their teaching styles to be effective in an urban middle school.

Many preservice teachers that these CTs worked with did not envision themselves teaching in an urban environment. According to two of the CTs, Ms. Akeman and Ms. Kelly, practicum experiences at Baldwin were a "huge culture shock" to the preservice teachers and required an adjustment period. Despite this "shock," Ms. Caster emphasized that exposing their preservice teachers to the "wonderful aspects of working in an urban environment and having them formulate relationships with the students is an eye-opening experience." Once the preservice teacher enters the urban-middle school classroom for the first time, it is, as Mr. Tabone discussed, "a new setting for them;" but after a few weeks of adapting to the environment, they "become so comfortable talking with any of the students...they could relate with the students and begin to create that bond that needs to take place."

However, Ms. Kelly emphasized one major challenge for her and her peers in trying to help their preservice teachers become more culturally responsive: stepping back and putting themselves in the shoes of future teachers to help them adjust. Many of the CTs in this study (as well as their preservice teachers) were White and middle to upper-middle-class. They needed to learn how to best reach their students by adjusting their teaching style. Once these teachers, who come from different cultural and socio-economic communities, begin to understand what the students value in their community, as Ms. Caster and Ms. Kelly found, they have an easier time developing relatable lessons and providing examples that can directly connect to their student's lives.

CRP extends beyond the classroom to keep students motivated outside of school; therefore, CTs should include their preservice teachers in after-school experiences to get to know and appreciate

their students in a different context. For instance, CTs at Baldwin began the STARS (Students Taking an Active Role in School) Program, which has provided students with more agency; in this after-school club, teachers mentor the students and help them become leaders by taking on responsibilities. According to Ms. Simon, initially, the program was created to include students on the school detention and suspension list because they "looked at the leaders. They might be repeat offenders. They might go to [in-school suspension]. But, they have a following. They are leaders in their own right. So, we thought let's work with those kids so the other kids can see them changing, and they'll do it too. It's about how we used the[ir] leadership in a positive way."

As Ms. Walton described, the thought was that by finding the passion of these students and channeling their natural leadership qualities into improving the school and becoming positive role models, the STARS students and their friends would step back on the right path and stay out of trouble. As the CTs who are part of this program found, students became more engaged when they knew that their voice matters - inside and outside the classroom. The impact of CRP inside and outside the classroom is a lesson the CTs pass on to their preservice teachers.

Flexibility

By developing a flexible teaching approach, teachers can accommodate the emotional changes and distractions that affect middle school students (Allison & Rhem, 2015). As Ms. Caster discussed, once preservice teachers get to know their students better, they will have a better grasp of how to deal with students' personal distractions and emotions that affect their engagement and disposition in the classroom, "Attitudes and personalities can vary greatly from day-to-day, and I believe, since our students are part of an urban environment, it plays a factor on how they come into school ready to learn." Structural inequities and resource gaps within urban communities that impact job access, childcare, transportation, and violence can result in students bringing baggage into the classroom that can impact their academic performance.

This is not to say that each student in an urban middle school does not also bring amazing cultural wealth, knowledge, and experiences to enrich the learning experience, but it is worth acknowledging when adapting curriculum and content to an urban environment. With experience, support, strategies from their CTs, and a concerted effort to better understand the context of their students' lives, preservice teachers can adapt to that reality.
When designing instruction, teachers in an urban setting realize that plans often need to be modified due to numerous challenges. For instance, one of the math teachers on maternity leave at Baldwin asked Ms. Mantle's preservice teacher if she could take six extra students into her class. Ms. Mantle explained that this was a great experience for her preservice teacher because "she was able to see the unpredictable nature of teaching;" the new class dynamic that arose was challenging for her initially, but she adapted well.

Supporting preservice teachers' development around flexibility requires CTs to help preservice teachers learn how to adapt their plans as they continue to get to know their students better. Ms. Caster, for example, wished she had better explained the behaviors and expectations for her preservice teacher. This way, the preservice teacher could formulate her lessons accordingly and not be discouraged if something did not go as planned. Additionally, Ms. Caster found her preservice teacher could address the "nature and needs of her students" to modify her lessons once she knew more about their needs.

By modeling this flexible approach, preservice teachers learn not to let small distractions impede their teaching. Preservice teachers may not initially celebrate the small victories such as students being on time to class by navigating their complicated transportation or a student remaining awake for the entire period after spending countless hours taking care of younger siblings. This is why it is the responsibility of the mentor teacher, as Ms. Caster stressed, to provide more context for the urban middle school environment.

Resources

Preservice teachers worry about the lack of facilities and resources provided by urban schools because their college programs are equipped with the latest technology and resources (Ali et al., 2014; Hudson, 2012). As Ms. Caster noted, CTs must show preservice teachers how to make the best use of each school's resources and utilize community partnerships. Through these partnerships, classes received donations from organizations such as the Kids in Need Foundation, DonorsChoose, Bridge of Books Foundation, and other local businesses. Often in urban districts, teachers need to adapt to resource-light schools, which may be a challenge for preservice teachers undergoing training in the latest educational technology at a teacher preparation program. For instance, in Ms. Caster's English classrooms, it has been difficult for her students to print the work they complete at home. Students often had to email the work to her or save it on a flash drive, resulting in Ms. Caster printing more than seventy papers. So, the students "wrote a proposal for a colorless, wireless copy/scanner printer, and they received it." By advocating for themselves, students could get an essential resource for their school.

In Baldwin specifically, there are plenty of laptop and iPad carts, yet the teachers and students were not properly trained on how to use them in classrooms correctly. Ms. Kelly believed resources were managed poorly at Baldwin, which made it difficult for teachers to take advantage of them. With those challenges in mind at the school, Ms. Simon thought that CTs should be responsible for exemplifying that even without adequate resources, by differentiating instruction, using available technology, and making accommodations for those who need them, students can still be successful in the classroom. In other words, it comes down to preservice teachers learning to be flexible and adaptable to technology. As Ms. Caster noted, "adaptability is something that you only learn from physically being in the classroom."

Many of the CTs at Baldwin found that resources that could be helpful to English Language Learners or special education students were only sometimes readily available. Ms. Lewis had a Baldwin student from the Dominican Republic that spoke no English in her classroom and was not supported through an English as a Second Language program. Luckily, the student, according to Ms. Lewis, "worked hard, and the class was wonderful and supportive" to help her learn English, even though there were no formal resources she could utilize in the classroom. Because the class came together like a family and supported that student's needs without physical resources, by the end of the year, Ms. Lewis found the student was "speaking English with no problem…[This was an] accomplishment that will always stick in my mind." This success continues to motivate Ms. Lewis to make a difference in the students' lives even if the resources are unavailable.

Conclusion

As the Baldwin CTs emphasized, obtaining experience in an urban middle school helps expose preservice teachers to many realities of teaching they might otherwise not experience or be exposed to through their teacher preparation. Traits of an effective urban middle school teacher - learning how to adjust an activity if students are not engaged, developing relatable lessons, and creating a unique teaching style - come with practicum experience and guidance from CTs who can model those practices. As this case study has shown, teachers can change the perception of teaching in an urban middle school setting through exposure, advice, and honesty. This change starts with mentoring in teacher preparation programs. If cooperating teachers in urban middle schools can support their preservice teachers with learning how to create and implement culturally responsive pedagogy, be flexible, and be creative with the resources they are given, they will be well prepared to succeed as new urban middle school teachers. As with all great pedagogical practices, preservice teachers cannot and should not choose which strategies they develop and add to their toolbox. Rather, CRP, flexibility, and attention to resources must be addressed as preservice teachers learn how to be effective urban middle school teachers.

Many components of this study limit its comparability. The research was conducted at only one urban middle school, and only the teachers willing to host a preservice teacher were interviewed. Further research should be conducted about urban middle school students' unique needs and mentor relationships between cooperating teachers and preservice teachers in this setting.

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