

Feature Article

“I Want to See Real Urban Schools”: Teacher Learners’ Discourse and Discussion of Urban-Based Field Experiences

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Urban educational contexts are increasingly complex, both in terms of what count as “urban” communities, and in regard to the increasing diversity of schools in these settings. Given that school-based learning experiences are a core element of nearly all teacher education, it is critical that we develop a better sense of how early career teachers are conceptualizing these experiences within urban contexts. This issue is of particular importance given the fact that the majority of teachers being prepared today do not have personal or educational experiences in urban settings (Sleeter, 2001). Findings from this study demonstrate not only the pervasiveness of deficit perspectives in teacher learners’¹ conceptualizations of “real urban schools,” a term that emerged from the participants’ group discourse, but also the power of critical inquiry as a framework from which to begin disrupting some of these assumptions. The article concludes by offering suggestions for how field experiences can be reframed in order to function as sites of possibility and change, rather than as living laboratories that uphold current institutional and societal inequities.

Recently there has been a strong focus within the field of education on how to address issues of historically under-served and under-resourced schools in urban contexts, particularly given the national focus on low tests scores, questions of cross-cultural achievement, and an emphasis on college and career readiness (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Leland & Murtadha, 2011; Payne, 2008). Historically, scholars have focused their attention on specific issues related to urban schools: how terms like “culturally-relevant” and “community-centered” shift from context to context (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), or how a predominantly White middle-class teaching population struggles to make sense of the urban contexts in which they find themselves after graduation (Merryfield, 2000; Sleeter, 2008).

¹ I use the phrase “teacher learner” instead of the more common “student teacher” or “pre-service teacher” to emphasize that learning and professional development occur across the lifespan of a teacher’s career. Furthermore, in many contexts—including the site of this study—emerging, early-career teachers and veterans work and study together. “Teacher learner” is a label that tries to recognize the evolving nature of this work, as well as the expertise and experiences that all post-secondary and graduate education students bring with them to the classroom.

Despite these general considerations, relatively limited attention has been paid to how “urban” is conceptualized, particularly in relation to field placements and teacher preparation within and for urban contexts (Howard & Milner, 2014). There is no doubt that the distinction between urban, suburban, and rural schools can be useful in teacher education, especially for making sense of educational disparities and historicized questions of power and privilege. However, there is still a need to think more carefully about how the term “urban” is being used, and what it often stands for in terms of race, class, or difference. In his article “But What Is Urban Education?” (2012a), Rich Milner discusses how “urban” is often a stand-in for other issues (such as race and class). He argues that the use of this term as a mask for discussing complex social issues upholds inequitable practices and common stereotypes of urban schools. Instead, he argues that we as a field need to be more clear and explicit in what we mean by “urban” in an effort to foster a common language and specific understanding of what is meant by describing schools as urban contexts. He goes on to detail how a more nuanced understanding of urbanness can help us support schools and foster greater equity for all students. This article aims to add to our knowledge regarding the term “urban” by developing a deeper understanding of how early career literacy teachers are defining and conceptualizing urbanness and urban schools in their field experiences. It does so in the hopes that these efforts will help us design teacher preparation spaces that can disrupt deficit discourses and assumptions about urban students and schools.

Furthermore, there are currently additional questions around how understandings of urban schooling context are being further complicated by the increasing number of charter, special interest, and magnet schools in metropolitan areas (Lipman, 2013; Payne, 2008; Wideen, 2013). In particular, the sudden explosion of private-interest funders and founders of charter schools in the largest cities of the United States brings into question how the landscape of urban education is mapped onto larger political issues around neoliberalism, standardization, and Common Core. These issues are connected to what Lipman (2013) conceptualized as a “right to the city,” a phrase that signifies “a terrain of struggle” over “education, housing, jobs, and health care” (p. 5). While urban schooling has historically focused on public schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Lipman, 2015), these political shifts require the field to reimagine the world of urban schooling, thinking about how charter schools, as well as private schools, parochial schools, magnet schools, and special admission schools, constitute unique spaces within urban education.

Participants in this study experienced their school-based learning in a teacher preparation program that can be situated within this complex landscape of urban education. The city in which this study took place faced many challenges that are commonly faced in large American metropolises: budget issues, low test scores, increasing standardization and control, burgeoning charter school openings—including certain large for-profit charter organizations taking over “failing” neighborhood schools—and increasing racial, linguistic, and ethnic diversity.

The twelve participants in this study were all in a master’s program in literacy education, situated in a private urban university. Their field sites included private schools, parochial schools, charter schools, comprehensive neighborhood schools, magnet schools, and partnership schools. Through their conversations around these school contexts, their assumptions, questions, and perceptions of urban education surfaced and shifted. This article explores how participants defined “real urban

schools,” a term that arose during group conversations. As the teacher learners navigated issues of culture, race, and language in their fieldwork experiences, participants often drew on deficit-oriented language and perspectives of urban communities—perspectives that influenced how they described their classroom practices and how they made sense of their field visits. While there was collaborative discussion and debate around such critical issues, deficit perspectives on the role of language and culture persisted, emphasizing the pervasiveness of these discourses, as well as how teacher education programs are situated within larger conservative structures of education (Smagorinsky & Barnes, 2014). These findings point to the need for teacher education programs, particularly those focused on preparing urban teachers, to reframe central practices, such as fieldwork, in an effort to shift urban education toward greater equity. In light of these inquiries, this study was guided by the following research question: *How do student learners describe and make sense of their urban school-based teacher preparation experiences?*

Relevant Literature

Here I focus on several bodies of literature directly related to “urban education” and field experiences. First, I provide an overview of literature addressing the concerns of teacher preparation for urban contexts. I then explore more specifically issues related to school-based learning as part of teacher education and the particular questions and concerns that emerge when considering urban school contexts as settings for field experiences in teacher education programs.

Teacher Education for Urban Schools

An important topic of research within teacher education in recent decades, has been preparing teachers with the specific content and contextual knowledge needed to teach in urban school systems (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Lee, 2007; McIntyre, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). In an editorial for *Urban Education*, Rich Milner (2012b) writes, “From my perspective, there is no issue more important to improving urban education—particularly the instructional practices of teachers in urban classrooms—than the preparation of teachers” (p. 700). However, surprisingly little work has directly focused on the particular challenges and possibilities of teacher education in and for urban schools (Howard & Milner, 2014). Often research on teacher education for urban contexts has focused on: having a predominantly White teaching population working in urban areas where an overwhelming percentage of the students come from non-White communities (Cochran-Smith, 2004a; Sleeter, 2012); recruiting and meeting the educational needs of non-white teacher candidates (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Cheruvu, Souto-Manning, Lencl, & Chin-Calubaquib, 2014; Pabon, 2014); and encouraging all teacher candidates to reflect on issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity more broadly during their teacher education experiences (Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004b; Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2000).² While these issues relate to teaching in all contexts, they are particularly salient in urban educational settings (Milner, 2012b; Sleeter, 2001).

² In her chapter, Sleeter (2000) discusses not only the range of topics related to diversity within teacher education, but also the range of research methodologies and theoretical approaches within this body of research. She reminds us to reflect on how certain lenses and methodologies get preference in teacher education research, as well as the implications for how teacher education has been studied and defined.

Furthermore, these concerns are situated within a larger national history of tension around issues of power and knowledge between universities and school districts—especially in larger urban contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). These relationships between schools and universities strongly impact how school-based learning experiences are framed, including implications for who is positioned as a knowledge producer and which perspectives are legitimized. Zeichner and Payne (2013) found that teachers’ and local administrators’ voices have extraordinarily little to do with the certification of new teachers. Often, official determination of success and achievement—for both teachers and students—is measured by standardized assessments designed by policy makers unfamiliar with the local contexts. This can lead teacher learners to focus on these narrowed views of achievement, disregarding the perspectives of their mentor teachers and/or supervisors (Jacobs, 2014).

Particular Issues of Urban-Based Field Experiences

Fieldwork is a particular and unique context within a teacher’s professional learning experience. While often depicted as a space to learn about specific pedagogical practices (Ball, Sleep, Boerst, & Bass, 2009), field experiences are also often the first time that pre-service teachers engage in school communities since their own K-12 schooling experience (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). These issues can have particular complications in urban settings, given that the majority of early career teachers come from suburban communities and schools (Sleeter, 2008). Thus, there is a particular importance of attending to how early career teachers are conceptualizing and framing issues such as urbanness early in their careers. In her seminal work regarding the complex learning related to teacher professional identity, Britzman’s classic text *Practice Makes Practice* (1991) highlights the importance of field-based teacher education. These structures and their implications are important for teachers of all levels of experience who are furthering their own education and thinking about their own roles as teachers. Student teachers in field experiences are engaged in community-based work that requires them to simultaneously participate and reflect on their own learning and identities within these sites.

With that said, there is relatively little research on the specific issues that face urban field sites. Burant and Kirby (2002) found that while field experiences did help to illuminate some of the ways in which teacher candidates were conceptualizing urban children and schools, several candidates ended the practicum with more negative and “miseducative” understandings of urban schools and communities than they had beforehand (p. 570-1). The authors suggest that field experiences in teacher education need to address teacher learners’ perceptions more directly. They also recommend that university and school-based practitioners collaborate to reflect the types of experiences being offered to teacher candidates, as well as on how these experiences are discussed and addressed in the university setting.

Tiezzi and Cross (1997) examined applying research on pre-service teachers’ beliefs to develop field experiences. They first examined and unpacked some of the assumptions and beliefs with which students entered the teacher education program, and then analyzed field experiences in relation to how they were structured to either support or inhibit students’ examinations of their beliefs. The

authors found that while field experiences can be a productive place for students to question their assumptions, there also exists the danger that the necessary structures for systematic reflection and inquiry will not be in place for these conversations to occur.

Tatum (1994) also discusses the need to invest time to change perspectives through conversations about difference and race, specifically when addressing these issues with White pre-service and in-service teachers. Here, she describes the possibilities for helping White teacher education students acknowledge their own histories and biases as they move through guilt or denial into a space of alignment. In other words, she offers one possible way of thinking about how to develop White allies within educational settings.

In a more recent study, Lawrence and Tatum (2004) investigated the power of an antiracist pedagogical model in a professional development series for practicing teachers. The sessions, which took place about every two weeks over a period of seven months, focused on helping educators “recognize the personal, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism” (p. 363). Although this program did seem to be successful in helping individuals recognize their ability to function as allies, many of the teacher candidates expressed concerns about how they would find spaces to act in schools that were, if not actively racist, certainly not antiracist. The authors end by urging for the development of similar programs and for the spread of such programs to higher levels of policy. These articles suggest the importance of considering how individuals enter the field—as practicing teachers, pre-service teachers, or through course-based field experiences—and how to foster more open conversations about race, difference, and possible roles for teachers in increasing equality in schools.

Conceptual Frameworks

Fieldwork as a Unique Site of Practice

School-based learning plays an important and unique role in any teacher preparation program (Jacobs, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). Therefore, it is important to develop a conceptual framework for field experiences as particular sites of practice and learning in teacher education. As I have discussed in previous work (Jacobs, 2014), one of the reasons to investigate fieldwork is its unique position within and across community, school, and university contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, 2009). The first step in doing so is to acknowledge the deep historic issues of power and authority pervasive within teacher preparation—issues that are particularly salient in urban school districts (Milner, 2010). Simply acknowledging these issues is not nearly enough; instead, to take advantage of the transformative possibilities of fieldwork in urban education, teacher education programs need to frame these spaces as sites of critical inquiry into both professional knowledge and community engagement.

Framing field placements as generative “contact zones” (Pratt, 2012), makes central political issues of power and agency as necessary elements of transformative teacher preparation (Giroux, 1992). Thus, field placements can be understood as powerful contexts from which to examine assumptions and explore whose truths or perceptions are valued to greater or lesser degrees. They also have the potential to become sites where practice is contextualized and situated historically. Working

from this perspective means emphasizing questions of knowledge, knowledge production, and history in considering the purpose and practice of using school-based contexts as sites of learning for teacher learners. This also means helping teacher education as a field not only develop a theoretical framework for urban education, but also delve deeper into how early career teachers broaden their own frameworks and perspectives.

Unpacking Urban

At this point, I want to address my use of the term “urban” explicitly. “Urban” is often used as a stand-in for more sensitive words, such as “Black”, “poor”, or “uneducated,” without fully explicating what is actually meant. It is also used as a shorthand way of expressing discomfort and distance from some of these issues—the question not only of where counts as urban, but also of “*who* [is] meant by urban” (Watson, 2011, p. 25, emphasis original). That said, there is no doubt that there are pervasive issues of power, agency, and access that deeply impact students and families in what we have traditionally defined as urban settings. Steinburg and Kincheloe (2004) define urban schools as those that share most of the following characteristics: in an area of high population density; high levels of poverty; high percentages of people of color; high percentages of immigrants, or people whose first language is not English. While this does capture a great deal of what is typically meant by “urban,” they risk creating a historically inaccurate representation of these districts and their communities as monolithic, both in their historical relationships with education and how they are impacted by current policies.

As a field, we need to interrogate these notions a little further. Donnell (2010) argues that in order to move beyond the deficit framework so prevalent in conversations around urban education, we must develop an ecological orientation that allows for more appreciation of the possible. Milner (2012) suggests a typological framework that allows for a more nuanced discussion of urban contexts for education. He proposes three general types of school districts: *urban intensive* districts are located in large metropolitan areas in the United States; *urban emergent* districts are in large but not major cities that face some of the same challenges regarding resources, teacher qualification, and student success; and *urban characteristic* districts in communities that traditionally would not be considered urban, but which might face some of the challenges associated with urban schools, for instance rapidly changing demographics, poverty, or an influx of English Language Learners. This more fine-grained approach allows for a discussion of particular aspects of urban contexts and cultures, while also acknowledging the ever-shifting populations and characteristics of American cities. In addition, it also allows us to consider how particular aspects of urban schools, for instance poverty, race, and/or language, also impact schools and districts traditionally conceptualized as being more homogenous.

In addition, there is a need to explore how and why educational contexts can vary even within specific districts. For example, within a large urban district such as the one where this study took place—what Milner would refer to as *urban intensive*—there is still a fair degree of difference among schools—from magnet schools to charter schools to neighborhood public schools—which together represent a range of learning contexts that differ with respect to their needs,

populations, and histories, despite being part of the same district. These shifts in urban education, the move away from comprehensive neighborhood schools to far more complex systems of choice and private interest, can have dramatic impacts on the experiences and decisions of intra-urban communities, particularly in communities where there is a high concentration of recent immigration (Baltodano, 2015; Billingham, 2015). Yet, the field of urban education—and that of teacher education—tends to refer to urban schools in ways that frame them as monolithic in terms of access and support.

This study aims to address some of these complexities by conducting a close analysis of the discourse and discussion of a group of master's students in a literacy education program that is specifically focused on urban education. By exploring teacher learners' own understanding of these terms—in addition to the impact their field experiences had on their conceptualizations—this study aims to contribute to our understanding of what is needed in order to prepare teachers to create more equitable educational opportunities for all students, as well as to appreciate the rich knowledge and experiences that these communities foster (Campano, 2007; Moya, 2002).

Methodology

Participants and Context

The data for this article come from a year-long qualitative project exploring how master's students in a literacy education preparation program at a large urban private university made sense of their field experiences. Twelve master's students—whose teaching experience ranged from none, to student teaching, to substitute work, to five years in the classroom—met every two weeks from September to May as part of an ongoing inquiry community exploring questions and experiences related to fieldwork. Of the twelve participants, eleven were also working toward their state reading specialist certifications. Nine of the participants identified as White women, two as Black men, and one as a Korean-American woman.³

In addition to the inquiry group meetings, seven participants in the study (four from the inquiry group, and three from the larger master's program) were interviewed three times over the course of the academic year, for a total of 21 individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45-60 minutes. These interviews focused on individuals' thoughts around literacy and fieldwork, as well as their shifting perspectives as they participated in and progressed through the literacy education program.

While I—a White woman and graduate of the same master's program—saw myself as an active participant in the group, frequently utilizing the word “we” in discussions, there were also issues of power and authority at play. At the time, I was a doctoral candidate in the same division, and was working as a fieldwork coordinator, teaching assistant, and instructor in the master's program. These concerns of positionality were particularly salient during explicit discussions of urban contexts, where issues of race, gender, and class frequently arose. This

³ During our final group sessions, the group collaboratively created an “identity chart”, collectively determining which aspects of their professional and personal identity they felt were salient to the work we had done together. Given the political and personal nature of identification, such as the use of Black or African American, participants were able to create their own labels for self-representation.

master’s program in literacy education had a strong emphasis on preparing teachers for urban and social justice-oriented education, as well as on sociocultural frameworks for literacy education (Cochran-Smith, 1995). The program also had a strong focus on inquiry and practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009). This focus also related to the ways that school-based learning experiences were designed as part of the program. Stemming from a theoretical framework that took community engagement as a serious part of teacher education, students were involved in a number of field experiences, ranging from structured observations as part of a course to two full semesters of practicum work, which included 140 hours in a classroom setting alongside a graduate seminar at the university. This seminar focused on helping prepare students as literacy educators and included a discussion of readings, sharing and designing lesson plans, and learning about particular pedagogical or curricular approaches.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data for this study were drawn from a variety of sources. At each inquiry group session two participants shared a narrative from their respective field placement, which then led into more general dialogue and conversation. During the thirteen inquiry group meetings, extensive fieldnotes were taken that focused explicitly on participants’ talk (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).⁴ These fieldnotes highlighted the individual narratives that participants shared, as well as the ways in which the group engaged collectively in discussion of the issues that arose from these stories. Each of the 21 interview sessions was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. In addition, written and visual artifacts were collected that either emerged from the group sessions (e.g., emails, notes, and collaboratively constructed charts), were brought by participants from their field placements to the inquiry group meetings (e.g., their students’ writing, journals, or drawings), or that were created by participants and shared with me individually (e.g., personal journals, or emails). Participants were offered the chance to provide member checks (Marshall & Rossman, 2010) in the form of follow-up discussions, as well as a chance to comment on any written work or presentation drafts that emerged from the study.

Data were coded using an inductive approach that aimed to uncover emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), with a particular focus on how participants constructed narratives (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) about themselves as teachers, their field experiences, and the schools they visited. The group was also structured as a collaborative space of practitioner inquiry, building on the belief that engaging deeply and systematically in collective practitioner-centered research can present new narrative and epistemological understandings, as well as offer new ways of framing professional identities in pre-service and early career teachers (Ravitch, 2014). Data analysis occurred in two phases. The

⁴ In the early meetings, several of the participants expressed some concern about being audio-recorded and the impact that recording might have on the ethos of the group. Given that one goal of this project was to foster a collaborative critical inquiry group within the teacher preparation program, the decision was made not to audio record the sessions. While that did mean losing details regarding specific language use, I attempted to address these concerns by focusing exclusively on talk in the field notes, rather than on other issues such as non-verbal communication, movement, or seating. I do not mean to imply that this attention is the equivalent of audio recordings in terms of verbatim collection of data; rather, I believe that this decision represented a compromise between the practitioner and research goals of this space.

first occurred during data collection (September–May) and involved developing emergent codes, as well as paying deliberate attention to the *a priori* codes and questions that I brought with me to the data. For example, while I knew that a particular focus was on urban education, it was the stories shared and subsequent group dialogue that led me to focus on the particular narratives (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007) that the participants drew upon in their discussion of these topics.

In the second round of coding, the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, with an emphasis on selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how participants were framing and contextualizing the discussion of central issues related to their experiences in urban education contexts. In particular, the expression “real urban schools” arose many times during the study, in both group discussions and individual interviews. During this round of coding I paid particular attention to participants’ narratives around emic themes or ideas, such as the concept of authenticity of urban schools. Specifically, I explored how participants used correlative statements as well as intertextual connections to develop a more nuanced understanding of the divergent and cohesive ways in which various individuals were calling on these clauses. By utilizing grounded theory, and more specifically iterative rounds of selective coding, I aimed to develop a deeply contextualized understanding of how participants were making sense of and discussing the complex issues related to urban education experienced during their field placements.

Findings

Fieldwork and Discourse around “Real Urban Schools”

The schools where these students conducted their field experiences were diverse in many ways and included charter schools, comprehensive public schools, magnet schools, and partnership schools. They were also in close geographic proximity to each other; almost all of the sites were within the formal city limits, although a few were in the surrounding towns and suburbs. At first, students referred to this work as in “urban schools,” connecting all of the schools, and assuming that everyone shared an understanding of what “urban” meant in these contexts and schools:

Savannah: Part of the reason we are all here is to learn more about urban schools and how to work with kids in these environments.

Emily: Urban ed gets such a bad rap, that it’s so hard. But obviously there are a lot of us, like our group here, who see possibility as well.

In these earlier conversations, there appeared to be a sense that what drew us all together was our focus on literacy and urban education. This was an important point of connection for those participants who frequently discussed the difficulties of being in a program that did not focus on a particular age range or grade level. As I began to look more closely at the participants’ discussion of “urban,” however, some interesting and at times challenging nuances began to surface. Across the conversations, there was an ongoing narrative theme of “real” urban schools, often in conjunction with students expressing disappointment (and, at times, relief) that they were in sites that they saw as “non-urban” in some way:

Veronica: I’m at [a local magnet school]. I’m so excited to be in a different kind of school. I’ve only been in typical urban schools before, low-performing schools. I’m excited to be in a school with more resources, to see what it’s like on the other side.

Here, through her recognition of a magnet school as a unique type of schooling environment, Veronica also implies a perspective on what “typical” urban schools are like, drawing on their lack of resources as a central aspect of their classification. In almost all of their uses of the phrase “real urban schools,” issues of poverty, lack, or chaos were referenced, either explicitly or through other discursive moves, such as metaphor or presumptions of shared knowledge. This quality of urban schools—as being under-resourced or in some other way deficient—became a central aspect of what the group members began to call “real urban schools”:

Lila: My fieldsite for Adolescent Literacy, it’s like a real urban school, you know, they deal with real problems like attendance, finances, violence.

Maddie: So far for fieldwork here I’ve only been in charter schools, so I don’t think I know what a real urban school looks like, especially since I grew up in the suburbs. So, in terms of urban education, I’m not really seeing it. Before I finish, I want to see real urban schools. You know, see if I can handle it.

Abby: I grew up [in this city]. My parents decided that the public schools weren’t safe for me, they had too many of the problems that we talk about facing urban schools. So I went to a Catholic school a mile away, even though there was a public school across the street.

Max: See, I grew up here too. And there was a notion in my community that Catholic schools were better, but that they babied you. We went to the real urban schools, these mad underserved messed-up places with no textbooks and teachers who barely wanted to be there

Interestingly, this discourse was pervasive across the various demographics and personal histories represented in the group. Above, Abby—a White woman—describes her personal history and her family’s decision to protect her from urban public schooling. She went on to express regret at this reality. Max, a Black man, pushes back against Abby’s perspective—but not by challenging her view of urban schools as dangerous, under resourced, or broken. Instead, he critiques the family and community decision to remove her from these spaces. Thus, although speaking from a broad range of personal histories and field experiences, the participants in this group shared some understandings about “real” urban education. Almost always these conceptualizations centered on the issues and challenges faced by these schools, or the presumed lack of resources within the school or community.

Framed in this way, “real” urban education became the space where students and communities struggled most, and the term often referred to communities that have been seemingly perpetually marginalized by the politico-educational system along racial, linguistic, and class lines. As such, these “deficit approaches to teaching and learning...that remain in what has come to be known as ‘urban education’ have included the expectation that students will shed their cultural identities, subjectivities, and languages” (King, Akua, & Russell, 2013, p. 28). In

these narratives, “real” urban education is linked in definition to an apparent lack or failure. To become a successful urban school meant, within this framework, that somehow the authenticity or validity of the school’s urbanness was lost. Success, then, became in many ways framed as acculturation to mainstream markers of success and ability (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Goldenberg, 2014). This framework suggests some troubling issues related to preparing urban school teachers, including a presumption of failure as the heart of what it means to be an urban educational context. These data reflect the fact that the widely circulating visions and discourses around urban schools (Hyland & Heuschkel, 2010; Milner, 2007), as well as teacher candidates’ own personal schooling narratives (Britzman, 1991), have an impact even before candidates begin their teacher education. As the following section illustrates, this deficit conceptualization significantly impacted how some participants engaged in and reflected on their field experiences.

The Pervasiveness of Deficit Discourses

It is perhaps unsurprising that students came in with and continued to grapple with a deficit perspective toward urban education given its pervasive and normalized place within commonly-held perceptions of education. What was more interesting, especially in regard to the research questions that guided this study, were the ways that their specific fieldwork contexts influenced how they engaged with and critiqued these perspectives. At times, these perceived deficits made it difficult for participants to understand why members of these school communities were still invested in them. When an announcement of almost fifty school closings in the district was impacting schools, Kelly shared her perspective:

In my site, I mean, the principal is great. I see her come in all the time. I’ve been in different grades, and she’s always popping in and out. She’s very interactive and the kids seem to love her. But in terms of the school—this sounds bad, but when my teacher told me they were closing it, I was like “thank god!” I mean—teachers don’t seem to care, there’s no heat in the basement, and only two bathrooms for K-5. There are kids getting beat up. They have to bundle up to eat. It’s very sad. There’s not even a gym. I guess—I mean, the principal and the teachers seem so sad, but I don’t see why that school should stay open. I mean, it’s bad even for an urban school.

Here, Kelly describes her efforts to make sense of the juxtaposition between the real and perceived issues she sees facing this school and the teachers’ and administrators’ dismay over its closing. However, the issues are framed as a part of urban schooling, making it hard to imagine the community-based resources or possibilities for the space. Rather than framing the lack of resources as an injustice to the community in the ways that we structure and finance education, Kelly instead places the fault within the “urban school” school itself, and consequently within the community.

On the other hand, this perception of urban education led students who were not in schools that they perceived as “real urban schools” to examine and explore the reasons for this disconnect. For instance, Emily did her spring fieldwork at a school that serviced the community around the university. This school, which has a

long and complicated history with the university and the community, was designed as both a neighborhood school for the catchment area and as a partnership school with the university. Built roughly a decade ago, this school is seen as one of the most successful in the district. At the time that Emily was doing her fieldwork, however, the school was at a point of crisis as the number of families who lived in the catchment area and sought kindergarten spots was far more than the number of spots in the schools. Emily described to the inquiry group the scene outside the school as the day of enrollment neared:

Last Tuesday was kindergarten enrollment day...The Friday before, when I was there, the first grandparent had gotten in line. Parents had been circling the school all day, waiting for somebody to get in line. Apparently they had been told not to line up until Tuesday, but nobody listened. People had relatives to come in from out of state to hold their spots in line. Registration was four days later, and it was really really cold. Parents had beach chairs. Somebody was constructing this tent out of piping. There were two Winnebagos parked, with people taking turns. They were there to stay. I mean, they were getting crazy. The first seventy people get spaces, then that's it. No more. I had never seen anything like it.

Ultimately, Emily noted, the police broke up the line, in part due to the below-freezing temperatures. The school decided to go to a lottery system, which upset many area families. Emily went on to share her perspectives on what drove this somewhat extreme behavior on the part of the families:

I feel for parents—you want to get your kids into the school, no matter what. But it's also so sad, the level of desperation. There are no other schools parents are comfortable with. I mean, in so many ways this was a way to get your kid into a (gestures air quotes) “non-urban school” in an urban district. And I also thought about who is in the line, who can afford that...I just think if there were more good schools then this wouldn't have been an issue.

Maddie, who was at the same school as Emily, reflected during an interview that she “probably didn't have the most urban experience, being at [partnership school]. It was, you know, a good school—where people want to be” (Interview, Feb. 4, 2013). In these moments, as in others across the data, participants coded “non-urban” schools as “good,” “safe,” or “desirable.” In the data, students rarely called directly on demographic details in defining their perception of the authenticity of urbanness in their field sites. Rather, the pervasiveness of what “real urban schools” looked like colored how these students made sense of their fieldwork experiences. In these moments, students were not building on frameworks such as Milner's (2012a) typology for defining urban education; instead, they were relying on the deficit orientations that emerged from their own lived experiences and/or participation in widely-circulated sociopolitical discourses.

Talking across their experiences, however, did at times enable participants to reflect critically on these differences and their potential impact on the lives of students and teachers. Lila echoed many of these sentiments toward the end of our work together, when she reflected on her various contexts for fieldwork:

I was at [a charter school focused on the local immigrant community and history] and a [partnership school]. I felt like I was put in those schools because they were seen as having perfect learning environments, pedagogies, and instructional choices. I felt super useless. When I went to [a comprehensive neighborhood school] it didn't seem perfect; it wasn't the "we're doing the best job ever" feeling—it was "we're teaching and doing our best." I was needed in ways that felt more authentic and real, more like what's really happening in urban education and not just the exceptional places.

While she emphasizes the same issues related to being "exceptional," Lila is starting to recognize variety within urban contexts, though not in ways that deeply interrogate her own assumptions of urbanness and urban schooling. She was not alone in this effort to make sense of these experiences while still maintaining her assumptions about the nature of urban schools. Veronica shared a similar sentiment when she described her neighborhood elementary fieldsite:

I couldn't believe it was, you know, a regular urban school. I mean—the kids and teachers are so invested. It's run down but it's so calm. And the lessons are amazing.

While many of these experiences were in schools that meet most of the criteria typically associated with "good schools," the participants still drew on the perception that these sites were the exceptions to the rule in urban education—going so far as to suggest that this level of success or sustainability made them categorically "non-urban." In the coding of the data, three terms made up the vast majority (over 80%) of the statements related to the broad theme of "not really urban." These were "safety," "desirability," and "academic success." Conversely, when describing schools as "real urban schools," utterances most often related to the codes "dangerous," "chaotic," "failing," and "under-resourced." Again, these demonstrate the pervasive ways in which the participants discursively and intellectually linked their conceptualizations of "urban schools" not only to demographic realities but also to theoretical assumptions related to almost exclusively negative characteristics of these communities.

Furthermore, there is a sad and strong reality that schools were and are not resourced equally across communities within the city. However, the fundamental issue here lies in how these various spaces are conceptualized by teacher learners and by educational research more broadly. To be a well-functioning school that meets needs and offers a sense of achievement—both in terms of the community as well as broader, more standardized measures of success—means to become in some way "non-urban." In other words, the only "real" urban schools are those that are, in Max's words, "mad, underserved, messed-up places." While this emphasis can help teacher learners better understand the systemic and hierarchical inequities that are pervasive in American schools, such an orientation also in many ways denies an appreciation for the vibrant and thriving schools—neighborhood, charter, magnet, and other—that also make up part of the urban educational landscape. It perpetuates what Weiner (2006) called the "deficit paradigm that is so deeply embedded in urban schools" (p. 65). Weiner continues:

School practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are particularly powerful because they are unspoken. We overlook our taken-for-granted ideas and practices to an extraordinary degree (Weiner, 2006, p. 66).

Weiner and other scholars (e.g., Donnell, 2010; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gutierrez, 1995) argue that in order for us to reimagine possibilities for urban schools, we first need to address what we mean by “urban,” as well as how the deficit perspective that undergirds much of our theory and research into urban education deeply impacts not only how these sites are perceived but also how we might imagine new futures or directions for these communities. Furthermore, Watson (2011) describes how interviews with pre-service teachers demonstrated that “urban” was not only used as an implicit way to code for race, but also that it presumed a lack of community and family support. The master’s program in which participants were enrolled took seriously the need to re-imagine how urban education was contextualized. However, despite the many courses that emphasized the need to move away from deficit thinking and instead move towards developing participants’ ability to adopt more of a resource orientation when talking about specific children, families, and schools, the deeply-rooted assumptions regarding the meaning of “real urban schools” continued to impact the groups’ discussions and reflections around their field experiences.

Discussion

It is important to note here that I include these stories not to criticize the members of the inquiry group or to blame them for these deficit perspectives, but instead to illuminate the pervasive and complicated ways that this framework influences the practice of early career or pre-service urban school teachers, particularly those who share a passion for entering urban schools as their sites of practice. These messages influenced how teachers were positioned by themselves and others, as well as how they imagined their futures. After her time in a local middle school, Lila shared:

I’m off my high horse. I’ve been able to see the real side of teaching in [this city]; the teachers are going through their day and trying to get done what really needs to get done. And that’s amazing. But I don’t know, I don’t know if I can do it. I think about Liam, whose class I visited in the Fall, and how he just got moved from one school to another with no warning, no input. And I mean, I think I’ll just burn out at those schools. But I also don’t want to be in those schools, where—like we talked about, where they are just so special, so privileged, even if it means I could teach they way I think we should. I thought I wanted to be an urban teacher, but now—I just don’t know.

Here, Lila casts herself in an impossible dilemma. To be an “urban teacher” means to work in a school that is struggling financially, academically (by mainstream standards), or in other ways. However, to take a job at a school with more autonomy or community—where the curriculum and community are functioning well—means to turn her back on that identity, even if the school is located in an urban context.

These findings point to the importance of thinking more critically about how we as a field can reconceptualize urban education in a way that simultaneously recognizes larger social inequities while also appreciating the possibility for local achievement and the successes of children, teacher, and administrators. Urban contexts are vibrant and complex, and the field of education does need to appreciate the challenges and possibilities inherent in these communities. However, without more critical perspectives of how we frame “urban education” and the spaces and conversations we invite early career teachers into, sites of teacher preparation will continue to perpetuate deficit-oriented assumptions about schools and communities, even as they visit these spaces as part of their teacher education.

Although many of the participants described their passion as working in urban schools, this focus often carried with it a deficit orientation, which was also evident in their descriptions of “real” urban schools, in which magnet schools, charter schools, and even successful neighborhood schools were often understood as “not really urban” despite their location within the same city boundaries. This finding points to the need for teacher education programs to go beyond conversations about the nature of urban schooling and the roles of race, class and difference, particularly in connection with fieldwork contexts as well as throughout a teacher education program. In addition, there is a need for teacher education programs which focus on urban contexts to actively foster opportunities for teacher learners in their programs to see the rich possibilities of these schools and communities. This framing is particularly critical in field experiences. Currently, practice-based learning in school contexts is presumed to offer students a chance to engage in and make sense of the daily work of teaching. However, far too often the responsibility to connect the larger socio-political discussions of coursework to the daily experiences of fieldwork is left almost entirely to the teacher learners. In addition, given the ways that these participants framed “real urban schools” and “non-urban schools” in this study, such discussions of urban schools as sites of possibility could either seem irrelevant, or even uphold the discourse of success as exceptional to the point of becoming inauthentic.

While many students came to the group with these perspectives, sharing stories from fieldwork did allow for some critical dialogue to emerge around issues of difference and how we as a group were conceptualizing the role of urban culture in relation to students’ learning and teachers’ work. Although these conversations did not lead to sudden transformations, they did create spaces for students to begin to reflect on their own assumptions and question the role of culture in the classroom. This finding speaks to the ways that even teacher education programs focused on social justice or urban education often struggle to help teacher learners think critically about their own deficit perspectives, while also learning better strategies for addressing these concerns in daily classroom practice (Berghoff, Blackwell, & Wisehart, 2011; Cochran-Smith, 2004b; Sleeter, 2001). This finding highlights the importance of engaging in conversations of praxis, within a framework of critical practitioner inquiry, using fieldwork as a foundation for discussions of how these larger theoretical frameworks around culture and language can influence the day-to-day pedagogical and assessment choices that a teacher makes. In other words, urban teacher education programs must both provide students with spaces to surface and question their own frameworks and offer alternative practices and perspectives to help shift the conversation.

A final note is that these issues related to urban field experiences are complicated by the question of who goes into teaching. Often positioned as the space where all conversations and learning about culture and difference should occur, practicum experiences and courses often presume a White, middle-class female audience—at times making traditionally marginalized students feel once again pushed to the boundaries of the classroom. When paired with fieldwork and dialogic spaces of inquiry, teacher education programs can try to foster a different approach to deeply inquiring into urban education—balancing the realities and presumptions/assumptions of teacher learners. These conversations are difficult and seemingly endless, but they offer the chance to transform the status quo of urban schools, preparing teachers who are willing to address their own assumptions and question their own pedagogical and assessment practices.

Conclusion

On the surface, the data shared here could paint a deeply negative picture of urban teacher education and the role of field experiences. However, when framed as a discourse that is learned and created, it is also possible to see the chances for fieldwork to function as a site of un-learning and re-learning what it means to work in “real urban schools.” When Maxine Greene (1997) speaks of finding sites of possibility in dark times, she does not shy away from the difficult realities that face many of today’s urban schools, communities, and teachers. For school-based learning contexts to function as the kinds of sites she references, they must first be socially, culturally, and historically contextualized. Individual teachers, especially early career teachers, cannot bear the burden alone. However, if we, as teacher educators committed to urban education, shift these sites from places of implementing prescribed practices to contexts for exploring the complex issues of culture, language, and identity that are ingrained in all school contexts, perhaps we can help foster a new vision of urban education—moving beyond conversation to deeper forms of reflection that are directly tied to action.

Positioning fieldwork as sites for critical inquiry into the nature of urban schooling means creating sustained spaces for ongoing dialogue and discussion not only of lesson plans, but of days spent in communities that are unfamiliar for many early career teachers. In addition, teacher learners need room to surface and interrogate their own assumptions about urban education in order for field experiences to function as sites for transformation. We need a new approach to fieldwork in urban education preparation that allows for new visions of “real urban schools”—visions that both acknowledge the inequities and challenges of today’s schools while also positioning schools and urban communities as complex sites of rich possibility.

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