

“Change Happens Beyond the Comfort Zone”: Bringing Undergraduate Teacher-Candidates Into Activist Teacher Communities

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Abstract

This article shares findings from a qualitative study of an undergraduate urban education fellowship designed to connect teacher-candidates with activist teacher communities and explore questions of social justice, equity, and multicultural teaching. Fellows attended conferences, professional meetings, and on-campus dialogues over one semester. Interview transcripts and meeting notes were analyzed through the lenses of teacher inquiry and transformative learning theory. Findings reveal how teacher-candidates experienced shifts in their viewpoints through encountering new perspectives, discomfort with returning to their lives with new understandings, and a strong drive to further their learning about urban education. Within the context of a persistent gap between a mostly White, middle-class teaching force and a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population, this study offers an image of transformative preservice teacher education in which teacher-candidates encounter professional communities outside of the confines of the classroom.

Keywords

urban teacher education, social justice, preservice teacher education, diversity

I went to the student teaching meeting, and they asked if we wanted to student teach in Philly. Three or four people raised their hands. People made faces, like, “Why would I want to student teach in Philly?” My roommate was like, “I want to student teach in the best conditions possible.” (Evie, undergraduate student)

As two White middle-class university-based teacher educators with a commitment to equity and social justice, we felt deeply concerned about Evie’s story. We were bothered by the impression that most of the teacher-candidates in our programs did not feel committed to preparing for an urban teaching career, and carried with them problematic assumptions about urban students and schools. We found particularly troubling the implication that student teaching in the “best conditions possible” meant seeking placements away from a city school, and the predominantly low-income and minority children who attend them. Finally, we were concerned that Evie, a teacher-candidate who was looking to translate her interest in urban teaching into preparation experiences, had limited opportunities to grapple with questions related to her interest despite the university’s relative proximity to an urban center.

The anecdote Evie shared occurred within the well-documented demographic gap between preservice teacher-candidates

and K-12 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 2003). Although we believe that it is urgent to recruit and retain a more demographically diverse body of preservice teacher-candidates (Bauml, Castro, Field, & Morowski, 2016), we also recognize that most teacher education programs remain overwhelmingly White and middle class. We sought to create a space for the mostly White teacher-candidates at our university to consider a range of possibilities for their teaching futures and conceptualize teaching as a personal, relational, and political act by creating an Urban Education Fellowship, a semester-long program that enabled a small group of students to learn about teaching in an urban context.

The goals for the fellowship were twofold. We wanted to build a mass of students whose interest in urban teaching would translate into a commitment to pursue urban fieldwork opportunities and careers. We also wanted to provide students with spaces to consider what it might mean to teach racially and culturally diverse youth with social justice

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goals. The fellowship consisted of six on-campus discussion sessions, attendance at one teacher inquiry community meeting, and attendance at two full-day conferences focused on urban education. We studied the fellowship to learn how our students interacted with some of the rich teacher inquiry and activism in Philadelphia while taking up issues of urban education in a supportive community of peers. This article reports on the first year of the fellowship, in which we explored the following question:

Research Question: In what ways does transformative learning occur when undergraduate preservice teachers attend conferences, teacher inquiry community meetings, and campus-based reflective dialogues?

We start by offering a review of recent literature on preparing teachers for urban contexts and social justice teaching. Next, we elaborate on the conceptual frameworks of teacher inquiry and transformative learning, and describe our research context and methods. Finally, we share our findings and conclude with implications for teacher educators and administrators.

Teacher Preparation for Urban Contexts and Social Justice Ends

University-based teacher educators have long been dedicated to preparing teacher-candidates for careers working in urban settings, with diverse student populations, and with an orientation toward teaching for social justice. In conceptualizing this study, we looked to studies on commitment and preparation for urban contexts for preservice teachers, as well as work on social justice-oriented teacher preparation.

Preparing Urban Teachers

One challenge in preparing preservice teacher-candidates for urban teaching careers is to foster interest in urban teaching and support the evolution of such interest into a long-term commitment to such work. Often, preservice teachers indicate an initial preference toward teaching children from a background similar to their own (Groulx, 2001) and in a school setting similar to the one that they experienced (Aragon, Culpepper, McKee, & Perkins, 2014; Chisholm, 1994; Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1999; Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1996).

It does seem possible to influence the intentions and actions of teacher-candidates toward a commitment to urban teaching. Several patterns documented in the literature suggest conditions that lend themselves to the development of such a commitment. For example, when teacher-candidates express a stronger sense of value for both multiculturalism and social justice as tenets of their teaching approach, they report a stronger desire to teach in an urban setting (Aragon

et al., 2014). In addition, teacher-candidates who experience student teaching placements in urban settings are more likely to accept an initial teaching position in a city school (Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016).

These findings are important because teacher-candidates who graduate with the highest levels of commitment to urban teaching accept positions in schools with higher percentages of low-income students and students of color, and stay in those schools longer than peers with lower levels of commitment (Frankenberg, Taylor, & Merseth, 2010). This trend is particularly true when such a commitment has developed alongside a disposition for hard work and persistence, a reflective stance, and both practical and academic preparation for urban teaching (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

It is also critical to provide preparation experiences that are designed with urban classrooms in mind. Programmatic-level studies have emphasized a focus on the unique challenges and opportunities of urban teaching. This research has pointed toward the value of “context-specific teacher education” (Matsko & Hamerness, 2014) that maintains program coherence (e.g., Whipp, 2013) and offers diverse field and community experiences (e.g., R. E. Lee, Eckrich, Lackey, & Showalter, 2010; Murrell, 2006). Matsko and Hamerness (2014) unpack the factors that are specific to urban settings, such as ability to teach in racially and socioeconomically heterogeneous settings, to contend with low-expectations for students of color, to deal with intensive standardized testing, to secure resources in underfunded schools, and to maintain focus on the urgency of now while also maintaining a vision of what could be possible. Opportunities to grapple with sociopolitical factors specific to urban contexts have also been found to be an important element of preservice teacher preparation. For example, Bartow-Jacobs (2015) calls attention to the importance of providing teacher-candidates with chances to grapple with the “explosion of private interest funders and founders of charter schools in the largest cities of the United States” (p. 19).

While we join others in our caution about the use of “urban” as code for race and class (Jacobs, 2015; Milner, 2012), we also agree with Matsko, Hamerness, and others who believe that there are contextual factors specific to city schools, and that providing preservice teachers with chances to encounter these factors before they become teachers will increase their effectiveness. This project is fueled by our desire to contribute to a better understanding of how teacher-candidates transform their interest in urban education into a commitment to teaching in urban contexts in a way that addresses issues of equity inside and outside of the classroom.

The Relationship Between Urban Education and Teaching for Social Justice

We believe it is important to situate inquiries into urban education within conversations about social justice, equity,

power, and privilege, and to support students in raising questions about the political nature of education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1985). Throughout the fellowship, we intentionally offered fellows invitations to consider issues such as school funding disparities (e.g., Kozol, 1991), institutional racism (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995), the expansion of charter schools in high-poverty areas (e.g., Buras, 2011), local versus state control of schools, teaching across social difference from positions of privilege, and media narratives about urban schools, communities, and youth.

Therefore, we also drew on research that focuses on programmatic and pedagogical approaches for developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach for social justice. We follow Whipp (2013) in defining socially just teacher education in this way:

Within the context of inequitable educational opportunities, particularly along lines of race, ethnicity, language, gender, and socioeconomic class, socially just teacher education aims to prepare teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways and also act as critical change agents in schools and society. (p. 454)

This definition acknowledges the political climate of savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) in which we live and emphasizes *both* the focus on individual classrooms *and* teacher activism outside of the classroom.

Within frameworks such as multicultural education (e.g., Banks, 2010), critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and culturally relevant teaching (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995), teacher educators have implemented practices that prompt the kind of critical consciousness that Whipp (2013) describes. Many critical teacher educators agree that preparing teachers to teach for social justice includes some combination of autobiographical self-work (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1995; Lee, Kumashiro, & Sleeter, 2015), engagement with injustices and marginalized perspectives (Jones, 2006; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016; Vasquez, 2013), community interaction (Cook-Slather, 2009; Jones & Woglom, 2013; Kinloch, 2013), and chances to grapple with outside expectations such as standardized testing and mandated curriculum (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1991; Sleeter, 2004).

Most relevant to this project are studies centered on community engagement. Kinloch (2013), who conceptualizes “teacher education as community engagement” (p. 108), describes the importance of preservice teachers talking with groups of K-12 students and teachers. She found that these conversations led her students to question their assumptions about urban youth and teaching. For example, when one student asked for advice about teaching “struggling readers,” a teacher responded by questioning the term, saying, “think about how you’d feel if teachers called you struggling. You got to do right by students, be real because they’re smart” (pp. 114-115). Similarly, Cook-Slather (2009) documents how she creates spaces for preservice teachers in her classes

to dialogue with urban high school students through weekly email exchanges. In interviews, students described “the importance of re-accessing the student experience in school; getting clear on what it means to really listen; [and] learning how important it is to take students’ experiences and perspectives seriously” (p. 178). In another study, Jones (2006) uses literature to provoke student encounters with marginalized voices and help them “move closer to knowing” (p. 295) the experience of class oppression and other forms of injustice. She also assigns her students to ride on the city bus for its entire route and finds that “fumbling around in unfamiliar spaces with unknown rules can help students recognize that every place—including schools—demands certain kinds of ‘practices’ for a person to be perceived as successful” (Jones, 2013, p. 12).

After participating in social justice-focused teacher education programs, many teachers adopt culturally relevant practices, but fail to couple these classroom practices with activism (e.g., Picower, 2012). Picower (2012) found that preservice teachers often struggle to recognize the systemic nature of racism and White privilege. Even among teachers who adopt critical practices *within* their classrooms, many fail to act as organizers *outside* of their classrooms to become fully realized social justice educators. Picower recommends teacher educators find ways to “link pre-service teachers with teacher activist groups” to support them in developing a “political analysis and a vision of justice” (p. 110).

These studies illustrate the potential of creating new configurations between teacher-candidates, practicing teachers, youth, and communities with a focus on the potential for these experiences to prompt teacher-candidates to challenge previously held assumptions. It is with this work in mind that we shaped the Urban Education Fellowship as an experience in which preservice teachers entered a city environment, witnessed conversations in which urban teachers grappled with dilemmas of practice, engaged with voices of youth, and reflected on these engagements in supportive on-campus dialogues. This study is based on the assumption that communities of teachers engaging in intellectual and activist work offers preservice teachers powerful counter-narratives about what it means to be a teacher and to teach in an urban context.

Conceptual Framework

We used concepts from practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009) and adult transformative learning theory (Brookfield, 1990; Mezirow and Associates, 1990) to analyze the context and learning in the fellowship.

Practitioner Inquiry

It was our intention for fellows to become immersed in inquiry communities, both at on-campus meetings and by participating in conferences and teacher learning community

meetings. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher inquiry as “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (p. 23) and see inquiry *communities* as a powerful context for teachers to make sense of their own practice. They write,

In teacher-research communities, groups of teachers engage in joint construction of knowledge through reading, writing, and oral inquiry. For example, through conversation, they make their tacit knowledge more visible (Polanyi, 1967), call into question assumptions about common practice (Giroux, 1984), and generate data that makes possible the consideration of alternatives. (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 459)

The fellowship allowed preservice teachers to participate in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which they observed and participated with experienced teachers who were inquiring into their teaching, questioning their assumptions, and expanding their beliefs about what is possible in school.

Inquiry often leads to an expanded sense of possibility in creating more socially just conditions in schools. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992), teacher inquiry can become a form of “social change wherein individuals and groups labor to understand and alter classrooms, schools, and school communities” (p. 470). Thus, we designed the fellowship to provide fellows with images of teachers working as intellectuals, advocates, and change agents.

When teachers are regarded in these multiple roles, practice entails “expanded responsibilities to students and families, transformed relationships with colleagues and other professionals in school settings, as well as deeper and altered connections to communities, community organizations, and school-university partnerships” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 135). This expanded notion of practice allows us to see the importance of spaces where teachers engage that are outside of the classroom, such as professional conferences and inquiry community meetings.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory suggests that our habits and expectations influence the kinds of meanings we derive from experiences, which we then organize into frames of references through which we view the world. Transformative learning occurs when one feels compelled to revise a frame of reference on the basis of new experiences. Mezirow (1997) suggests that,

a defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. [...] Transformative learning facilitates autonomous thinking. (p. 5)

In the context of competing messages about what is best for students and top-down reforms continuing to affect teachers’ lives, it is imperative that teachers entering the profession think autonomously, forming their own judgments as they decide where to teach, how to teach, what kinds of professional learning opportunities to pursue, and with whom to surround themselves.

Mezirow argues that “critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” is the primary vehicle through which one might re-organize their frames of reference. He notes that “we do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). We sought to structure experiences for the fellows to engage in the kind of critical reflection that would lead to a re-thinking of their assumptions regarding urban teaching.

We were also aware that critical reflection can be challenging, even unsettling. As Brookfield (1990) explains, “engaging in critical thinking is not a continuously joyful exercise in creative self-actualization. It is psychologically and politically dangerous, involving risks to one’s livelihood, social networks, and psychological stability” (p. 179).

Context and Method

Guided by principles of practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), we took an ethnographic stance toward our data to understand our research questions. We analyzed our data inductively using a recursive analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to refine our findings. We were participant-observers in that we participated in the activities of the fellowship while also documenting what happened.

University Context

West Chester University is a regional state university located approximately 35 miles west of Philadelphia. The College of Education and Social Work offers undergraduate degree programs leading to certification in Early Grades Preparation, Middle Grades Preparation, Special Education, and Secondary Education. Although the conceptual framework of the teacher preparation programs includes tenets of additive models of multicultural education (Banks, 2010) such as “valuing diversity,” there are no courses that explicitly address transformative and social action-oriented elements of multicultural education (Banks, 2010), such as critical literacy, anti-bias education, awareness of structural racism, or social justice-based pedagogy. Nor does the college currently offer an intentional pathway through which teacher-candidates can prepare specifically for urban teaching. Opportunities exist, but have been developed and sustained through individual faculty members.

The Philadelphia Public School Context

The School District of Philadelphia is the eighth largest in the United States, with 218 schools and over 134,000 students (School District of Philadelphia, 2016). It faces persistent problems such as budget cuts, school closures, conversions of public schools to charter schools, high-stakes testing, scripted curricula, and top-down professional development. These trends toward privatization and standardization are similar to initiatives underway in many urban centers (e.g., Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2011).

Philadelphia is also home to a rich history of teacher inquiry (Lytle, Portnoy, Waff, & Buckley, 2009) and activism (Quinn & Carl, 2015), providing mechanisms for challenging reforms and re-imagining classrooms. The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (PTLC) is a progressive group that has been gathering weekly since 1978 to look closely at students and their work. The Philadelphia Teacher Action Group (TAG) is a grassroots organization that works toward "an education movement for liberation, locally and nationally, through shared analysis, political education, mutual support and learning, and joint projects" (TAG, Philadelphia, 2016). TAG organizes Inquiry to Action Groups (ItAGs) that bring together educators and community members to explore social justice-focused topics. The fellows attended a minimum of one PTLC or ItAG meeting during the semester.

The Structure of the Fellowship

The fellowship, which took place over the course of one spring semester, involved three key components. First, fellows attended two conferences, TAG's annual Education for Liberation Conference and Practitioner Inquiry Day at the Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania. Practitioner presentations at both of these conferences are often collaborative and justice oriented, with dialogue around questions related to teaching in the current political climate and enacting culturally responsive approaches to teaching. We required fellows to attend the keynote for each conference and then select concurrent sessions to attend for the remainder of the day. The keynote for Practitioner Inquiry Day was Valerie Kinloch, whose talk was titled "Race, Place, and Justice: Possibilities for Publicly Engaged Scholarship in Urban Communities." Sessions that fellows attended on that day included ones focused on culturally relevant teaching at a social justice-focused public school, teaching "for joy and justice" (Christensen, 2009) in a standards-based era, teacher activism in Philadelphia, and youth activism in Philadelphia. The keynote for TAG's Education for Liberation Conference was a youth panel of high school students whose comments centered on the conference theme, "#BlackLivesMatter: Centering Racial Justice in Our Fight for Public Education." Sessions that fellows attended at the TAG conference included ones focused on critiquing the "all lives matter" mantra, connecting core curriculum to students' lives, and building a

criminal justice reform movement with youth both inside and outside of prison.

In addition to the conferences, fellows also attended at least one ItAG or PTLC meetings of their choosing on topics such as teaching about racial justice in the wake of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, standardized testing, and hip hop in the classroom. These meetings occurred mostly on weekday evenings and were facilitated and attended by experienced teachers and community members, allowing the fellows to participate in authentic, teacher-driven professional development.

The third component of the fellowship was a series of six on-campus meetings in which fellows prepared for and reflected upon their experiences at the conferences and meetings and also engaged in critical dialogue around issues relevant to urban education, the Philadelphia context, and questions that arose in the other parts of the fellowship. Early meetings focused on chances for fellows to learn about their own and each other's goals for engaging in the experience, previewing conference programs and options for teacher inquiry community meetings, and generating questions that they wanted to think about during the semester. Meetings during the latter part of the fellowship were more issue-focused, as we read and responded to articles about racial justice in schools, unpacked news stories about the sociopolitical context of Philadelphia, and discussed fellows' questions that were sparked by the Philadelphia visits. Our meeting structures usually included an opening reflection, sharing, engaging with some sort of text, and a chance for fellows to discuss their perspectives on various issues.

Participants

The spring 2015 fellows included six teacher-candidates and one psychology major (see Table 1). We distributed a recruitment flyer via a college-level listserv to students enrolled in undergraduate teacher preparation programs or the Youth Empowerment and Urban Studies (YES) minor program. We shared paper copies of the same flyer to students in our classes and with colleagues. We asked applicants to address four questions: Why do you want to participate in this program? What do you anticipate gaining? What will you offer to the community of fellows? How do you anticipate balancing this commitment with your other commitments? We received 17 applications.

We knew that we would have challenging conversations, and so we sought a cohort that was intimate in number and comprised of individuals who seemed able to benefit from and contribute to the group. We considered three factors in our selection. We looked for students who had a long-term interest in working in urban communities, a sense of curiosity and willingness to consider multiple perspectives, and time in their programs to participate in other urban-focused experiences.

We invited seven applicants to participate, and all seven accepted. We were cognizant that our selection process could result in the inclusion of a particular profile of student, one

Table I. Fellowship Participants.

Participant	Year	Program(s) of study	Race/childhood home
Amelia	Senior	Middle grades preparation major Literacy minor	White Small town
Evie	Junior	Early grades preparation major Special education major	White Rural area
Jennifer	Junior	Middle grades preparation major	White Urban
Kareem	Junior	Psychology major Youth empowerment and urban studies minor	African American Suburb
Lillian	Sophomore	Early grades preparation major	White Suburb
Maura	Senior	Early grades preparation major Special education major Literacy minor	White Suburb
Natalie	Junior	Middle grades preparation major Literacy minor	White Small town

who may be predisposed to transformation and change. We recognized that it may be difficult to disentangle the influence of fellows' characteristics from the impact of the fellowship. We believed, however, that the experience could create opportunities for learning that would not have been achieved without it, and we were committed to understanding what those opportunities were and how the learning was experienced.

Data Collection

On-campus meetings were audio recorded and one of us took field notes while the other facilitated the meeting. We collaboratively read notes and transcribed instances where fellows talked about their experiences in the fellowship, reflected on new ideas, or discussed current issues in education. We did not transcribe portions of meetings during which we addressed logistics or provided background information without additional conversation.

We conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed two semi-structured interviews with each fellow in spring 2015 and fall 2015. The first interview focused on participants' backgrounds and their goals for the fellowship. The second interview focused on key moments and turning points in the fellowship and goals moving forward. We analyzed artifacts, participant applications, meeting agendas, conference programs, writing produced during meetings, and handouts from conference sessions. Finally, we kept a shared research journal in which we wrote observations about each activity in analytic memos.

Data Analysis

As practitioner researchers, we analyzed our data in an ongoing way throughout spring of 2015 to inform our practice. After each meeting, we shared aspects of the meeting that stood out to us and ideas that we wanted to pursue with the fellows. We met together after each conference to share our

observations of how the fellows engaged with and responded to the conference. We began our project by posing a series of research questions organized around three areas of inquiry, including questions about the engagement of the participants with the experience, our engagement as facilitators, and participants' identities and identity development.

In summer 2015, we began a holistic analysis of our data set, and decided to focus specifically on the engagement of the participants. We chose this as an initial focus because we wanted to gain insights that would assist us in refining the experience moving forward. Also, as a result of ongoing analysis during data collection, we felt that our participants had engaged in a way that had resulted in new insights, and we wanted to outline those insights in a systematic manner.

We began by reading the data and developing thematic codes using inductive analysis in relation to our focal research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We identified 12 master codes and three sub-codes, which we applied to the data during a subsequent round of analysis. We collaboratively coded our first three meeting field notes and had conversations about our coding structure. For example, in a post-conference meeting, one fellow shared that, "one [idea] that stuck out was how can I inspire urban students despite negative surroundings," which one of us originally named as "stereotypes" and the other as "questions." Through discussion together, we agreed that while the statement may imply stereotypical thinking about urban communities, it is framed as an inquiry into a teaching dilemma. We utilized these conversations as a mechanism for establishing working definitions for each of our codes. After this, we separately coded our three remaining field notes and the interview transcripts.

After reviewing our completed coding, we decided to further focus on one of our research questions because we had noticed that many of the codes were related to it. The question on which we focused was, *In what ways does transformative learning occur when undergraduate preservice teachers attend two conferences, a teacher inquiry*

community meeting, and campus-based reflective conversations? We then re-read the data set a second time with that question in mind. Looking across our coding of the data, we identified three emerging themes around which our codes seemed to be organized.

At this point, we also decided to focus on the six White preservice teachers. It had become clear from our analysis that Kareem, an African American psychology major, was experiencing the fellowship differently. The data showed us that, while the preservice teachers were asking questions related to their future careers as teachers, Kareem was asking questions related to his career path. While our analysis revealed trends related to the preservice teachers' learning, Kareem's participation indicated a different set of inquiries and insights. We suspect that Kareem showed up as a disconfirming case because of some combination of race, gender, and professional aspiration. Kareem's participation, however, raises important questions that we intend to re-visit.

Transformative Learning in the Urban Education Fellowship

Our analysis of the preservice teachers' engagement with the fellowship uncovered how they came into contact with new perspectives, returned to their lives as changed people, and felt an urgent desire to know more about the issues that they had encountered.

Coming Into Contact With New Perspectives

Attendance at conferences and teacher inquiry community meetings, as well as readings during the on-campus meetings, provided fellows with opportunities to see the world through the eyes of people with experiences different from their own. Many presentations at the conferences included the voices of youth living in urban areas. Natalie reflected on viewing student artwork at the Education for Liberation Conference:

Just the fact that some of them said, "Why do I get accused for things that I didn't do?" I tried to put myself in their shoes at that age and just living in that world and having those kinds of concerns and worries.

This comment reveals how Natalie empathized with students when viewing their art. The idea that young people were aware of the stereotypical ways in which they were viewed was an unfamiliar concept. She began raising questions regarding what that might feel like.

Jennifer, who grew up in a mostly White section of Philadelphia, described how hearing students from a mostly Black neighborhood share their writing prompted her to question her frame of reference about that neighborhood:

Those kids were from Kensington, a part [of the city] that I was petrified of, like never ever ever would I go there. The stereotypes

just break down and you actually realize there's a story behind them and a reason why.

In this example, Jennifer is critically reflecting on the assumptions upon which her prior point of view was based (Mezirow, 1997).

Contact with students' perspectives also prompted the fellows to see previously invisible systems that affected their lives. For example, Evie reflected on a presentation by youth who had been affected by laws that allow youth to be held pretrial in adult jails, noting "I didn't even realize that happened, and just hearing how it could've ruined their lives." She then went on to question how these policies have come to be:

Another question that I have is how that even got passed. I understand that maybe they had this thought that it would scare youth into not doing these crimes, but obviously it's not working, so why is this even in place in the first place?

Encounters with urban students' perspectives enabled fellows to develop empathy, challenge stereotypes, and raise critical questions. Instead of accepting outside interpretations of the students' experiences, the fellows analyzed their experiences through new lenses, and questioned their original assumptions. We viewed these insights as autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997) in that they were not sanctioned by an authority, but derived from a re-consideration of what it is like to be a young person in an urban community.

The fellows also cited as significant the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of people of color. Lillian shared her experience talking to a Black man about video clips that depicted people of different races responding differently to a news account. She said, "it really opened my eyes to the deep seeded racism that's not always in your face. He opened my eyes to 'that's why this was racist,' I was like 'Oh my gosh, you're so right.'" Similarly, Jennifer shared an experience of coming to see racism in her teacher inquiry community meeting when a woman of color spoke:

It was majority White. There was only one person of color, one woman of color. She brought up the question, "how do you guys talk about race?" And everyone just shut down and I was actually thinking about it and I don't. Unless, of course, the situation occurs. And all of us felt the same way and she was like "well, that's a problem. Nobody talks about it unless you're forced to." She has to deal with it on a daily basis. She's forced to deal with race, whereas me, even though I'm not privileged, I'm still White. The color of my skin is still White, so in that way I am privileged. So I'm not forced to deal with race in that way. So that was really eye-opening and I never thought about that before.

Jennifer, like Lillian, talks about how a person of color's perspective "opened her eyes" to something that she had not previously seen. While Lillian's comment indicates a newfound reckoning with racism, Jennifer's comment reveals how she was beginning to understand the concept of White

privilege (Kimmel, 2002; McIntosh, 1989), as she realized that she has the privilege to not think about race. Bringing up issues of race and racism in the classroom is something that Jennifer shared she felt more competent doing when she noted at the end of the fellowship:

I feel more comfortable teaching it and teaching that concept in the classroom now . . . I feel like as a White person, I have to become acclimated and accustomed to a variety of different cultures and races and that sort of thing.

As Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue, taking an inquiry stance toward practice includes engaging in communities of inquiry in which one encounters different perspectives (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, pp. 44, 86) and leverages those perspectives to take on issues of “equity, engagement, and agency” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 12). These examples illustrate how others’ perspectives influenced the fellows’ evolving understanding of the world.

New perspectives also prompted fellows to raise questions about the implications of taken-for-granted concepts, such as color blindness and community service. Fellows first started problematizing color-blind discourses in one of the on-campus meetings, when we read a *Rethinking Schools* article titled “Black Students’ Lives Matter: Building the School-to-Justice Pipeline” (The Editors of Rethinking Schools, 2015). In sharing impressions of the article, Maura explained that in response to the “big debate” about whether to say “Black Lives Matter” or “All Lives Matter,” she appreciated a quote from Filipina activist Rhonda Ramiro, who illuminated the connection between U.S. wealth built through slavery and our country’s ability to colonize countries like the Philippines. She felt it was helpful to see the ways that racism against African American people in the United States has affected others around the world and how communities of color internationally shared concerns of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The final meeting, after fellows had attended a conference session titled “#AllLivesMatter? How Unconscious Bias Affects Our Culture and Our Classrooms,” reveals the way that other fellows questioned their previously held color-blind ideology (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Lillian shared that the workshop was a critical moment for her by sharing, “me being ignorant I’m thinking all, that’s people with special needs, people of all races. And she made a really good point that it’s taking away the race part of it . . . It’s completely taking away from the movement.”

Amelia built on what Lillian shared by adding,

At first, I would have said the same thing, all lives matter of course, but I could see where they’re coming from now. Where folks are gonna say “Black Lives Matter,” because of the whole White supremacy that’s always been there. There’s never been [racism against] Whites. It’s only been against Blacks.

The conference session prompted Lillian and Amelia to situate the Black Lives Matter movement within a social movement and within the context of White supremacy. Their comments reveal an emerging understanding of systemic racism, White supremacy, and color-blind ideologies, and they use these ideas to critique the slogan “All Lives Matter.”

Similarly, at the Ethnography Forum, the fellows questioned discourses around service learning. After an address by Valerie Kinloch titled “Race, Place, and Justice: Possibilities for Publicly Engaged Scholarship in Urban Communities” raised questions about what it meant to actually immerse oneself in the communities in which one works, the fellows discussed how the talk forced them to question concepts like “community service” and instead aspire to engage with communities in more collaborative, less hierarchical, ways. Maura shared,

Going back to Valerie Kinloch’s speech where she talked about service learning versus community engaged learning. We want to go in and fix things, do something to make it better. It was interesting to learn that might not be the best way. [Instead we need to] go in with a collaborative mind and work with people.

Other fellows agreed that this shift was notable, which led them to discuss implications for their future work. Many were drawn to the idea of becoming part of the community in which you work and wanted to think together about ways they could “go in with a collaborative mind” when they began their careers. These examples, both in our on-campus meetings and at the conferences, demonstrate how the fellows became part of inquiry communities in which they “engage in joint construction of knowledge through reading, writing, and oral inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 459).

Questioning one’s assumptions is a central aspect of both practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Through dialogue with others, fellows came to new understandings about themselves as racial beings, their previously held stereotypes, and their approaches to teaching.

Going Home a Changed Person

As fellows came into contact with new perspectives, they felt a sense of discomfort about bringing their new thinking back to their campus and home communities. Conversations with family members, roommates, and classmates often left fellows feeling unsettled. For example, in our final meeting, Evie shared her frustration with wanting to talk about the experience but not yet feeling able to do so:

When I got back to my apartment and talked to my roommates about it, I was like “I went to this great conference” and they wanted me to talk about it, but I don’t know how to explain the emotions that I went through that day. . . . I just feel like there’s

a lot going on in my head and I need to organize it so that I can talk to other people and spread what I've learned.

In addition to struggling to talk with others, fellows discussed a heightened sense of responsibility when they witnessed racism or injustice. At a meeting, Amelia talked about her discomfort around family members when they said "negative things" about Black people:

I found myself in a position yesterday where I was with a bunch of family and they started talking about Black people and just negative things about them and I found myself wanting to bring up what I went to. I tried to go into it and say "I went to this conference, this was what was brought up," and I couldn't—negativity kept overruling me.

She later shared that now that she's being more educated on these issues, she feels "much angrier" when family members make racist remarks.

At that same meeting, Natalie described a story about how a conversation in a teacher inquiry community meeting about "difficult discussions" led her to reflect on a recent experience in which she was in the car with classmates and "one made a comment and exclaimed the n-word multiple times." She shared how "I found myself shutting down. And it was so interesting because I guess I don't really take part in these kinds of conversations so I don't—Not that I don't have the knowledge, but I don't have."

Another fellow asked, "Like the courage?" to which Natalie said,

Like the courage, how to address it. It was so interesting because they talked about it at the ItAG and I literally listened to them speak and I was like "wow, I am that individual. I do not have that exposure" and if I had gone through this [fellowship experience] would I react differently? Would I have spoken up?

The experiences in the fellowship led participants to feel more responsibility to act when they witnessed injustice, but did not yet feel as though they had the tools to do so. They also highlight the sense of risk that transformative learning scholars have acknowledged is an inherent part of the process. As Brookfield (1995) writes, that critical reflection "is also something we instinctively resist, for fear of what we might discover. Who wants to clarify and question assumptions she has lived by for a substantial period of time, only to find out that they don't make sense?" (p. 2). Ellsworth (2005) describes what she calls the "crisis of learning," of "letting go of a former sense of self in order to re-identify with an emerging and different self that is still in transition" (p. 89). These descriptions of returning home a changed person highlight this discomfort.

Jennifer raised this new responsibility to act in her follow-up interview, when she described that

if I hear someone say a racist remark, I'm like "Yeah, that's not okay and you need to change your language." Whereas, before I

would've just been like, "I'm not going to engage in it, but I'm not going to say anything either" kind of thing.

As an example, she shared how her mom "isn't the best when it comes to that," but that she now confronts her and "we'll have arguments about it and they'll get heated." This comment shows Jennifer analyzing her past self and present self in relation to racist remarks that she hears. Not only has Jennifer's perception of the world changed, but so has her sense of responsibility for taking action.

Despite the instances of feeling uncomfortable and pre-articulate, as fellows began to process their experiences, they sought opportunities to share with and challenge others, including peers, friends, and family members. For example, at a meeting, Natalie felt inspired to share what she had seen at one of the conferences with classmates, describing,

I got a lot from the last session we attended . . . I've been talking to some of my friends and I showed a bunch of my friends the video. How they're set up for failure. It made a big impression on me. My friends thought it was powerful too—not just the education major ones . . . Tomorrow I want to see if I can give a presentation to my class.

Lillian shared how she talked with her grandparents about her desire to teach in a city school:

After I went to my grandparent's house. They're very "don't work in Philly. We don't want you to work in Philly." It was nice to be able to talk to them about what I was actually doing. I showed them all my notes. It was really cool, they started to have different views.

In these cases, we see how the fellows wanted to educate others by sharing their new learning. Natalie felt a desire to influence her friends and classmates, while Lillian talked about the way that she educated her grandparents. The fellows were hoping to expand their communities of inquiry by creating new opportunities for dialogue.

A Desire to Know More

As fellows entered back into their lives as changed people, their experiences were both empowering and unsettling. Along with these feelings came strong desires among many of them to continue learning. After talking about her conversation with her roommates, Natalie said, "I really want to immerse myself more."

Amelia's desire to learn more was in response to her discomfort with her family members' "negativity" when talking about Black people. She shared at a meeting,

I couldn't find the words to go against what they were saying. I just wanted to say "you're wrong, you're so wrong." And it made me so mad. I want more exposure too because I want to know what to say when the negativity comes up. I don't know. It bothers me so much.

These examples speak to the power of personal relationships in the fellow's desire to "immerse themselves," "get more exposure," or learn what to say. They speak to what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) call an "inquiry stance," or an orientation toward teaching in which practitioners seek to learn on behalf of their students and toward social justice goals.

Other fellows named specific opportunities that they wanted to pursue. At a meeting, Jennifer shared that the fellowship led her to enroll in a course in the YES program:

I was actually thinking about doing one class in the YES minor . . . I don't have enough room to fit three classes [to complete the minor], just one. Before this experience I would have never thought about it. I would have just been like "no, it's for nothing."

This quotation illustrates not only Jennifer's desire to enroll in a class but also suggests a changed perception of the purpose of coursework. Rather than to fulfill requirements, Jennifer talks about taking the course "for nothing," or, for the purpose of learning itself. Evie, too, shared with the group that the fellowship influenced her course choices, as she was now trying to enroll in a field course located in Philadelphia. After reading the course description to the group, she said, "Just the fact that you are in Philly for two full weeks. I've only ever been there for a day."

Being in dialogue with teachers from across the city and country exposed fellows to learning experiences about which they were previously unaware. For example, after a presentation at the Ethnography Forum by a group of teachers from Oakland, California, who mentioned the Teacher Activist Network's "Free Minds Free People" conference in Oakland, Jennifer said,

I went back home and told [my roommate] "I want to go to Oakland!" She followed up by expressing that she wanted to attend more conferences, sharing "I learned so much in a day—more than I could in a classroom.

These comments suggest that the fellowship experience deepened fellows' understanding of learning as a continual process, as they sought out "exposure," "immersion," and conferences where they could continue their learning.

These comments show that by the end of the fellowship, many of the fellows were setting intentions to pursue new opportunities. In their seeking new learning, fellows were extending their inquiry stance, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note is "a worldview, a critical habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across professional careers and educational settings" (p. 120). They expressed a desire to learn more so that they could respond to injustices and misperceptions, and were beginning to see themselves in communities of inquiry that were ongoing and voluntary.

Discussion and Implications

Our findings regarding fellows encountering new perspectives, returning home changed people, and desiring to know more suggest several implications for teacher preparation programs that intend to build a commitment to urban teaching from a social justice perspective.

Creating Spaces for Urban, Social Justice Teacher Education

There is not only an imperative need for urban and social justice-focused teacher preparation but also a (sometimes quiet) demand for it. We were encouraged to discover, hidden within a dominant culture of negative stigmas and stereotypes, students eager to explore careers in urban areas. Undergraduate preservice teachers responded to our call for participants, and we reached an underserved and ill-prepared population at our institution. We found that the fellows appreciated our community, and there was a strong sentiment at the end of the semester that they did not want the group to end.

There was a significant increase in the number of applicants to the program in our second year. As students heard about the opportunity, more eager and curious students applied. As a result, we have become increasingly committed to the concept of "context-specific teacher preparation" (Matsko & Hamerness, 2014), and are actively working within our institution to shape a teacher preparation path that is devoted to urban teaching. At the same time, we continue to identify strategies through which preparation for social justice-based teaching practices can be more thoroughly embedded throughout our programs. Even absent large-scale programmatic changes that would be ideal, we encourage faculty to explore creative ways to advocate for such spaces at their institutions.

In addition, we recognize the value of teacher preparation accreditation standards that emphasize clinical experiences in diverse settings and suggest the importance of dispositions that demonstrate an intention toward culturally responsive teaching. We caution, however, against the assumption that simply placing teacher-candidates in particular settings will result in beneficial outcomes. As the fellows encountered and processed new perspectives, they seemed to need the space that our group provided, one that was intimate in size and characterized by a sense of trust and support. We believe that it was through structured conversations that the fellows were transformed by the perspectives that they encountered.

Navigating Relationships With Home Communities

Our findings also suggest a need to attend to the discomfort that White preservice teachers feel in terms of their relationships with their families and home communities. Over the course of the fellowship, it became clear that the difficulty of returning home a changed person was an especially salient

theme. Many fellows spoke about the lack of support and troubling stereotypes that family members expressed about their choice to explore teaching in an urban area. Literature exists about the challenges and possibilities of eliciting paradigm shifts among White preservice teachers (e.g., Addleman, Brazo, Dixon, Cevallos, & Wortman, 2014; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Cook-Slather, 2009; Picower, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). However, few studies look at the phenomenon of returning home a changed person among White pre-service teachers.

The prevalence of stories of clashes with family members and feelings of relief in the room when fellows shared about their families' perceptions made us realize that this was an area where fellows needed support. While we are generally aware of the discomfort of coming to see the world differently than before (e.g., Brookfield, 1990; Ellsworth, 2005; Mezirow, 1997), we believe that the teacher education field would benefit from additional inquiries into how White (usually suburban and middle class) preservice teachers negotiate relationships with their families who see things differently than they do and the kinds of practices that would help them in navigating these relationships.

Teacher educators should consider ways to structure spaces for students to talk about their relationships with their families, offer and receive support, and rehearse and evaluate possible responses to family members, friends, and prevalent institutional discourses. As students may start feeling more distant from the people with whom they grew up, we believe it is equally important for them to develop strong intellectual, political, and emotional support systems among people with similar worldviews as they are beginning to have. The fellowship structure allowed preservice teachers to participate in activist teacher communities that many have continued to be part of beyond the fellowship. Teacher educators should consider how they might make experiences with social justice teaching communities available to preservice teachers. These efforts can serve as a starting point to overcoming a potential barrier to attracting and retaining high-quality social justice-minded teachers to schools in urban areas.

Expanded Notions of Practice

Our findings reveal the value of preservice teachers coming into contact with a wide range of different perspectives including those of students, practicing teachers, and people whose experience, race, and class differ from their own. Through these experiences and dialogues, fellows expressed a strong desire to continue to have critical dialogues with other professionals and continue to learn more about students' neighborhoods, school discipline policies, and teaching for social justice. Their comments indicated their desire to gain "exposure" and "immerse themselves" in new experiences. In the absence of the fellowship space, we wonder if the fellows would have so strongly desired to inquire further into issues such as race and racism, or building partnerships

within communities with which they did not identify. Because we join others in our belief in the importance of recognizing the ways in which teaching can be a social, cultural, and political act (e.g., Zeichner, 2012), we believe that these kinds of inquiries are essential to the fellows' future lives as educators.

Lytle (2006) describes an *expanded notion of practice* as the "deep belief in teachers as leaders in their own classrooms, as makers of knowledge about teaching and learning, and a parallel conviction that the walls of classrooms do not delimit their commitments and responsibilities as educators" (p. 261). Our commitment to teacher preparation encompasses experiences that not only prepare students for a teaching career within a classroom but that also help them to frame the role of teacher as one that extends beyond the classroom. In the context of the fellowship and within our work as teacher educators more broadly, we see an "expanded notion of practice" as a stance toward preparing preservice teachers for both pedagogical work with their future students and the personal work of being a social, cultural, and political agent within a larger community. The fellowship experience was one effort in this direction.

The research literature on teacher retention suggests that retention of early career urban teachers is a significant challenge for the profession (Johnson, 2007; Nieto, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). We suggest that as teacher preparation programs expand their notion of what teaching practice encompasses, they can create new opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with educator communities beyond the classroom. When we conceptualize teaching practice as occurring both within and beyond the classroom, we can introduce teacher-candidates to professional networks that have the potential to be "incubating and sustaining" (Ritchie, 2012).

Specifically, we found that introducing the fellows to activist teacher communities in Philadelphia allowed them to see aspects of teaching practice such as raising critical questions about teaching; learning from students and their communities; and banding together to take political action against unjust policies. Teacher research has been conceptualized as a "collective struggle for humanization" (Campano, 2009) and recent research has found that teacher activism often offers a sense of hope in the face of endless pressures and mandates (Quinn & Carl, 2015; Ritchie, 2012). These communities gave the fellows a place to return to as they asked new questions, sought additional knowledge around urban teaching, and imagined their futures as teachers.

Several of the fellows continued to participate in the activities of the teacher communities, and built relationships with individual members in them. Some are engaging with these communities as they enter into advanced fieldwork, student teaching, and teaching in Philadelphia. This study points toward the possibility that communities of politically and intellectually involved educators have potential to form mentoring relationships with teacher-candidates and support their ongoing learning beyond the confines of the traditional teacher preparation curriculum.

Next Steps

As we work with new cohorts of students, we have begun to raise new wonderings that we desire to explore in the future. First, we wonder about the ways in which our fellowship might be experienced by different groups of teacher-candidates, including those who do not have an established interest in urban teaching or those who have already begun to pursue opportunities to prepare for urban teaching prior to their participation in the fellowship. Second, we wonder about the development of a construct that we have named collective mentorship. Just as preservice teachers experience mentorship through placements in classrooms with practicing teachers, we theorize that preservice teachers could experience mentorship through placements with teacher inquiry communities and activist organizations. Finally, we wonder about the experience of the fellowship for participants who differ from the majority in terms of race and professional aspirations, as we observed Kareem pursuing an engagement with the fellowship activities that was in many ways qualitatively different. His experience, along with literature that speaks to the challenges of anti-racist education in racially diverse settings, has prompted us to raise critical questions about the experience moving forward.

Conclusion

The current educational landscape has been marked by several trends, including the demographic gap between teachers and students, increases in top-down corporate-driven educational reforms, and persistent inequalities in resources between urban and suburban schools. In the face of these challenges, there is an urgent need for schools of education to respond by attracting teachers of color and teachers from low-income class backgrounds into schools of education and mitigating barriers for them to do so. At the same time, there is also a need for widespread and deep-cutting programmatic reform that structures social justice, anti-oppression curriculum for all preservice teachers and exposes students to urban contexts early and often. This study joins a growing body of evidence that points to the importance of such restructuring. It also points to the power and potential of creating spaces for smaller groups of students to move, in Evie's words, "beyond the comfort zone" and into places where their views of themselves, urban schools and communities, and what it means to be a teacher, might be radically transformed.

Author's Note

The quotation in the title is one of the fellow's "five word memoirs," which was a writing prompt that we did during our last meeting, in which each of us described the essence of the fellowship experience in five words.

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