

# Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research

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Volume 8, 2012

**Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and  
Research**

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Next Call Deadline: Sunday, March 17, 2013, <http://www.aera-ultr.org/callforpapers.html>

The *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research* accepts quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research that addresses issues of urban learning, teaching and research; manuscripts should be 1500-3000 words not including references and needs to be submitted in correct APA style to be considered.

Please send submissions electronically to the 2013 JULTRA Editor, Dr. Virginia Navarro, [Virginia.Navarro@umsl.edu](mailto:Virginia.Navarro@umsl.edu) between February 1- March 17, 2013.

Note: Every author and co-author must document current AERA and ULTR SIG membership at submission time. A signed publication authorization statement that verifies that the manuscript is not under consideration at another journal is also required as part of the submission process.

## **'FIXING THE KIDS' TO FIXING THE CONTEXT OF URBAN EDUCATION**

**Kelly McNeal, Editor, 2012**  
*William Paterson University*

**Virginia Navarro, Associate Editor, 2012**  
*University of Missouri-St. Louis*

As we reflect upon the corpus of articles for the 2012 JULTR issue, we feel they anticipate in some ways the theme of the upcoming 2013 AERA Conference: *Education and Poverty: Theory, Research, Policy, and Practice* that focuses on links between poverty and education. When we expand the definition of poverty beyond a traditional economic definition to issues of intellectual and moral poverty, it becomes clear that education, broadly conceived, means nurturing a new generation of moral global citizens. Economic poverty is often measured in terms of free and reduced lunch eligibility, but the other poverties, intellectual and moral, raise new and complex questions and challenges. The articles in this JULTR issue emphasize the need to build intellectual and moral capital in school communities so we can move beyond a notion of “fixing the kids” to fixing the context of urban education. We look forward to reader feedback and reaction to this set of articles chosen for the 2012 issue; our hope is to provoke further dialogue about urban learning, teaching and research by SIG members engaged in the work of urban education.

To begin this issue, Simmon’s article called “Exploring how African American males from an urban community navigate the inter-racial and intra-racial dimensions of their experiences at an urban Jesuit high school” looks at the resilience of African American young men as they encounter racism and micro-aggressions at an elite private school. This article suggests that while the students’ flexibility and persistence overcame many of the difficulties they faced, the school community failed to engage in a moral and intellectual dialogue around privilege to confront issues relating to social justice such as racism and classism.

In Gamble, Kim and An’s article, “Impact of a middle school math academy on learning and attitudes of minority male students in an urban school district”, we get a glimpse into the impact of a single-sex academic program on the motivation and learning of urban boys. Does seeing oneself in the role of learner eventually result in actual math learning measured on a developmental continuum? The authors discuss multiple variables to unpack the, too often invisible, barriers to success in math for urban males that often result in truncated future opportunity.

The next two articles, Garza’s “Initiating opportunities to enhance preservice teachers’ pedagogical knowledge: Perceptions about mentoring at-risk adolescents” and Kenyatta’s “From perception to practice: How teacher-student interactions affect African male achievement” are similar in that they uphold the premise that student/adult relationships and interactions within the school context significantly influence learning environments and academic and social outcomes. Garza focuses on the learning of preservice teachers; his study suggests that preservice teachers in urban settings may enhance their pedagogical knowledge and learning by mentoring at-risk students. While the traditional notion of mentoring might point to how mentors may “fix the kid”, Garza’s

research shows the complexity of context suggesting ways the kids might “fix the mentors.” Service learning, when integrated into the curriculum as a learning opportunity rather than ‘do-gooding’ can get future teachers into the community to be educated. While Garza focuses on preservice teacher knowledge, Kenyatta focuses on in-service teachers and on how unexamined perceptions shape practices that can deeply influence the academic achievement of African American males.

Vision, selfhood, solidarity – are these also moral or intellectual characteristics a person can be “poor” in? The article “Pre-service teacher vision and urban schools” by Roselle and Liner makes a case for how investing in preservice teachers’ vision will positively impact school environments. Preservice teachers inevitably have visions of teaching linked to their own background and experience, so they bring a limited worldview to decision-making. Mahoney in “Rediscovering good teaching: Exploring selfhood and solidarity in urban contexts” echoes this call for inviting preservice teachers into intentional reflection on their own sociocultural stories as preparation for urban student teaching.

Davis, Mitchell, Dray, and Keenan appropriately expand the conversation about urban schools to supporting multilingual learners in “Bruce Randolph High School: A case study of an urban school becoming successful for multilingual learners”. Latunde and Louque then extend the conversation about how to support diverse learners to the world of special education. Preservice teachers document direct and indirect strategies to connect with parents and the community of their students as part of meeting state standards. Elizabeth Dorman’s piece concludes the 2012 issue with an account of a new teacher’s journey in “Negotiating tensions in curriculum and interactions with colleagues in a new school context” that reveals how situated contexts influence a teacher’s ability to engage in “culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy.”

This issue represents thoughtful writing by engaged authors that touch on the many faces of poverty and education. Please respond with comments to us and to the authors as you read this issue. Thank you to reviewers and authors for their contributions to JULTR.

# EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES FROM AN URBAN COMMUNITY NAVIGATE THE INTERRACIAL AND INTRA-RACIAL DIMENSIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AT AN URBAN JESUIT HIGH SCHOOL

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## Abstract

African American males from urban communities have been attending Jesuit high schools in urban spaces for many years, yet little to no literature exists that explores their experiences while attending these elite private schools. This qualitative study of 10 African American males from an urban community attending a similarly positioned Jesuit high school on the East Coast revealed their struggles with both inter- and intra-racial dimensions of their experiences. This paper explores their challenges with racist comments within the interracial context and their understandings of ‘acting White’ within the intra-racial context.

**Keywords:** African American Males, Jesuit High Schools, Inter-racial and Intra-Racial Interactions, Urban Schools

As portions of the larger society have tended to view urban African American males with “some degree of dissonance and trepidation” (Spencer, 2001, p. 103), the quality of life for many has hovered near the bottom in the United States. Framed by their overrepresentation in the prison system and consistent racial profiling by law enforcement officials (Parks & Hughey, 2010), high rates of illiteracy, and elevated infection rates of HIV/AIDS (Anderson & Simmons, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010), their experiences in urban public school systems have been no better. Situated amidst their disproportionate placement in special education or remedial reading courses, higher rates of suspensions and expulsions than other race males, underrepresentation in gifted or advanced courses, graduation rates as low as 27% in the Detroit Public Schools (Kincheloe, 2007; Polite & Davis, 1999; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), and similar data associated with attending and graduating from colleges and universities (Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Toldson, Brown, & Sutton, 2009), far too many urban African American males are being rendered obsolete by our educational system.

In an effort to counteract the negative experiences and poor academic outcomes associated with the educational experiences of many urban African American males, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a religious order of the Catholic Church, has devoted an extensive amount of its energy to educating these young men. To many, Jesuit high schools are considered to be elite private schools that have a significant population of

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upper middle class White students. However, based on the insistence of St. Ignatius, the Society of Jesus founder, that all Jesuits commit to serving the oppressed and disenfranchised (Scibilia, Giamario, & Rogers, 2009), a focus on urban African American males aligns well with their mission. By using the Jesuit secondary education model to emphasize the importance of schooling to the formation of character, along with the desire to integrate both the humanistic need to serve others with the scholastic need to excel academically (O'Malley, 1989), the Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA) and its member schools have sought to recruit and retain urban African American males.

Widely recognized for their students' attendance at elite colleges and universities in addition to graduation rates that exceed 95 percent, Jesuit high schools have spawned the careers of a number of successful African American alumni (Wirth, 2007). When one considers previously discussed social and education data related to urban African American males, it would seem as if Jesuit high schools could provide a positive academic outcome for them. Fenzel (2009) and Kearney (2008) would certainly agree with this assertion based on their work on Jesuit secondary schools in eight urban cities. However, their attention to this matter did not include an examination of the experiences of African American males at the traditional Jesuit high schools, which have largely White student populations. In an effort to fill that gap in the literature and respond to York's (1996) call for more research on "smaller, more discrete populations in Catholic schools" (p. 13), this paper explores the experiences of African American males from an urban community who are attending an urban Jesuit high school along the East Coast of the United States. As such, the guiding question for this study is "How do African American males from an urban community describe their inter- and intra-racial experiences at an urban Jesuit high school?"

### **Method**

In an effort to explore the experiences of African American male students from an urban community who are attending a Jesuit high school, a qualitative study was implemented. Although data reflect the number of African Americans attending Catholic schools (NCEA, 2010), this qualitative project is designed to go beyond the numerical placement of the students (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and embrace York's (1996) suggestion that more research should be conducted on specific populations attending Catholic schools. By using a phenomenological mode of inquiry, this study aims to explore how these students describe their inter- and intra-racial experiences at a traditional Jesuit high school in an urban city along the East Coast of the United States. Considering the positionality of the Black students at a mostly White Jesuit high school in an urban community, phenomenology fits perfectly with my goal of discovering and exposing their experiences while also allowing the students to examine their own thinking and interpretations of those experiences (Lynn, 2006). It is not the intention of this study to claim that all African American students similarly positioned will have the same experiences or understandings. Rather, the phenomenological framework utilized in this study allows for an extensive understanding of the "experience-rich participants of this study" (Gorski, 1998, p. 59) while also acknowledging multiple interpretations of situations that might be connected by similar life conditions or experiences (Bogdan & Belkin, 1999).



## **Setting**

Green Jesuit High School (GJHS), a pseudonym, is located on the East Coast of the United States. Founded in the early 1800s by members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the school has 950 male students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Of the 950 students, African American students comprise 10 percent of the student population. Admitting one third of the students who apply and noted in various publications as the premiere Catholic school in the metropolitan area, GJHS has developed a reputation as a top-notch academic institution that is an athletic powerhouse in football, basketball, lacrosse, crew, and rugby.

## **Participants**

The primary method for locating participants was purposeful sampling (McMillan & Shumacher, 2001). After communicating with the president of the school, it was determined that the faculty sponsor of the Black Student Union (BSU) would be the primary point of contact. By sorting through the school's database to identify students who self-identified as African American, we determined that 30 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders would be contacted. Of the 30 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, 10 returned the appropriate consent forms and agreed to participate. The participants in this study were all African American males who lived in the city. Their median grade point average was 2.7 on a 4.0 scale. Each of the participants participated in two or more activities, and all of the participants identified athletics (basketball, football, and track) and the Black Student Union as their most significant activities.

## **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

All of the participants participated in an in-depth, one-on-one interview; six participants also participated in two separate focus groups as a follow-up task. Each interview lasted no longer than 60 minutes while the focus groups lasted no longer than 90 minutes. All of the interactions with the participants were recorded and subsequently transcribed prior to analysis. Once text was transcribed, the primary researcher reviewed participants' responses several times. Instead of looking only for frequency in themes, the primary researcher looked for underlying meaning in participants' responses. The text was further reviewed for contrasts and comparisons in the wording. A comprehensive list of master themes was generated from this process, and the themes identified from this portion of the data analysis were discussed with an independent auditor at several points. The auditor made suggestions for revision of some of the themes.

Data for this study were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) due to the need to explore how the participants generate meaning from their experiences in schools by focusing on their thoughts and perceptions. The goal of this data analysis was to explore the processes through which participants make meaning from their lived experiences. Utilizing an immersion strategy, the primary researcher was able to make assessments and judgments based on "intuitive and interpretive capacities" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 155). As such, a deeper understanding of the subject matter was obtained while also providing opportunities to reframe understandings of the students' experiences.

## Findings

Negotiating race at GJHS starts at home. When looking back on their decision to attend the school, all of the participants revealed that their parents made sure that they recognized that they were entering a very different world from their neighborhoods. Having lived in all-African American neighborhoods and considering the historical racial divide in the city and metropolitan region, five of the ten students were given explicit instructions to “always be on guard for the racism that gets thrown your way” (Marcus, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). For the others, their parents indicated that they “weren’t there to worry about the white folks and any issues with race, they were there to get an education” (John, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). With these conversations firmly planted into their minds, all 10 participants in this study stepped into GJHS as freshman with a sense of “excitement,” “nervousness,” and “hesitation.” Nonetheless, there was no backing out. As one of the students explained:

My parents don’t play about education and they knew that GJHS was the best place for me. So when I complained about this or that, they weren’t interested...they said to figure it out because you aren’t going anywhere. (Thomas, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

To understand the navigation of race at GJHS, two categories of interactions emerged as important: inter-racial and intra-racial.

### Interracial Interactions

Representing a small percentage of the student body, all of the students in the study shared their numerous experiences as the only African American student from the city in numerous classes. The significance of this situation was animated when issues of race were brought up in class or when White students made broad generalizations about the city. Although lacking in agreement as to whether White students’ negative comments were racist or a result of bias, they all agreed that being the only African American student from the city in a class was a challenge.

The other day someone made the comment about people in the city only getting welfare and how some of them don’t even need it. I wanted to say something but I just didn’t feel like wasting my energy. (Ricky, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

My biggest challenge is when the teacher looks at me when slavery comes up in world history. I’m looking at the teacher like don’t even think of calling on me but this dude did. Not only did he call on me but he asked if we talked about slavery at home. (Matt, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

As their experience with interracial situations extended beyond the classroom, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders expressed frustration with the “acting Black” phenomenon that had played out during their four years of attendance at GJHS. Noting the ways in which White students adopted an “acting Black” demeanor whereby “fake Black person slang and saying things

like ‘yo what up dog’” (Rodney, Personal communication, March 14, 2011) became normative, the inter-racial tension was escalated. Furthermore, comments by White students in which they “jokingly called me homeboy or bro” (Rodney, Personal communication, March 14, 2011) resonated with all of the participants. However, two of the students indicated that these statements bothered them especially when they included the word “nigga.”

Sometimes they’ll walk up to you and you think they are going to talk to you and you wait for the conversation to start and they say stuff like ‘you better watch it boy’ and then you say, ‘man, stop playing with me’ and then you laugh it off. Or else they’ll come up to you and be like, ‘what’s up my nnn-.’ They’ll like stop there. (John, Personal communication, March 15, 2011)

The challenge of dealing with these types of issues is in determining an appropriate response.

Lamar struggled with lashing out either physically or verbally, yet Herman suggested that he ‘is there to get an education, not deal with racist white boys’. (Personal communication, March 14, 2011)

### **Intra-Racial Interactions**

The two different perspectives on how to respond to perceived racist comments were similar to the students’ understanding of the intra-racial issue of acting White. As some of the students in the study perceived acting White as nonsense and “Black folks needing to expand their horizons” (Marquin, Personal communication, March 15, 2011); others offered a more scathing critique. Using language like “Uncle Tom,” “sell outs,” and “oreos,” it was quite obvious that notions of “acting White” are a serious point of contention within the African American community at GJHS.

As the students looked for ways to discern what it means to act White, the tension between themselves and their suburban counterparts emerged. Lucian suggested that many of the African American guys from the suburbs had been “blinded to the reality of being Black” (Personal communication, March 14, 2011) because of their financial privilege. Marquin contextualized his experience through a discussion in class.

This one white kid told me that ‘no one’s racist and that no one cares about race.’ I was looking at this dude like he was crazy. But the funny thing was that the Black kid who was in the class agreed and believed that Black people are too sensitive about race. (Personal communication, March 15, 2011)

This interaction—and the strained relationship—provides some context for the most revealing display of segregation in the school: the cafeteria and the school’s common area (above the cafeteria, similar to a student lounge). Looking back as 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, the participants admitted that the African American kids from the city always sat at their own table in the lunchroom and in the common area. This physical display of segregation in an integrated school had no rhyme or reason according to the students. According to Marcus, “it has always been that way and I don’t even know why. It just is” (Personal

communication, February 21, 2011). As the others nodded their heads, agreeing with Marcus' comments, Lucian seemed to agree but indicated that he did not adhere to that unwritten rule.

I have like two tables that I usually alternate between. One table, which is all Black; then I have another table which is I'd say half Black, some mixed race kids, and maybe three or four White guys. (Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

Although Marcus had previously indicated that this arrangement was just happenstance, John and several others believed that this set-up was an intentional effort on the part of the African American kids from the city to find some solace and comfort from those with whom they perceive to have the most in common. In fact, this arrangement—or the fact that it is available to those who choose not to participate every day—provides a “safe place to kick it without feeling like we're going to be judged on how much money we have, where we are going on vacation at—cause most of us ain't going to Switzerland to ski” (Matt, Personal communication, February 21, 2011).

### **Discussion**

The daily interactions between White students and their suburban African American peers at GJHS indicate that the students in this study are navigating bifurcated notions of racial interactions—both inter- and intra-racial. As their experiences associated with the inter-racial interactions are situated within an understanding of racial micro-aggressions, their sense of community and safety associated with sitting at the “Black table” in the cafeteria cannot be entirely unexpected. As “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities” (Sue et al., 2008, p. 72), racial micro-aggressions can be psychologically damaging or force African Americans into isolation, with additional feelings of “self-doubt and frustration” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2009, p. 69). As a result, their retreat to the safety of their African American peer group is very much aligned with Murrell's (2007) situated-mediated identity theory. By trying to find ways to “inoculate themselves against the ubiquitous assaults on their identity” (Murrell, 2007, p. 26), the short-term result is a positive feeling of safety and—as one of the students stated—“when I'm around my own people I can do me” (Marcus, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). Although Spencer (2001) suggested that these types of coping strategies might “exacerbate an already challenging situation in the long run” (p. 103), the communalism established during their retreat to the cafeteria table, whereby they could share their stories, is their effort to maintain their sense of self in the short run.

With their retreat to the safety of their cafeteria table serving as a response to interracial conflicts, the young people in this study are equally challenged with making sense of the intra-racial relationships between themselves and their same-race suburban counterparts. Although they did admit that they had a “great relationship” with the majority of the suburban African American students, the tension seemed to reside around their understanding of acting White. Similar to the contested space in the literature in which numerous scholars (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Fryer, 2006) have challenged Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) articulation of the theoretical nature of acting White, the students in this study linked acting White not to academic performance, but to ways of being African

American. In other words, the students in this study articulated a view of African Americans—males in particular—that resonated with their urban experiences. As such, the financial hardships that they mentioned in their families and the various ways that they used slang were assumed to be normative behaviors or economic structures for all African Americans as individuals and families.

The intra-racial dynamics associated with their schooling experience are linked to their understanding of how an African American male should behave. Noting their voice inflection when mimicking their suburban counterparts, it became apparent that diction and intonation played a significant role in determining if students were “from the hood or Black enough” (Herman, Personal communication, March 14, 2011). Although this tension was certainly evident when describing the multiplicity of experiences of African American males at the school, little evidence emerged that the urban and suburban African American students were placed into positions where conflict would be the outcome. In fact, several students endorsed Marcus’ sentiment: “Yeah we might have different ways of talking and places to live, but at the end of the day we are all brothers” (Personal communication, March 15, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The majority of African American males in urban communities attend public schools, yet those who attend urban Jesuit schools seem to be in an environment where graduating is a foregone conclusion and attending college is not only a viable option, but the expectation. Despite this academic outcome at the majority of Jesuit high schools, little to no research has been conducted on their individual experiences at these schools. This paper sought to assist in filling this void. Based on the findings, Jesuit schools would do well to ensure that professional development for the staff include relevant conversations related to cultural competency as well as explicit dialogue about the lives of the urban youth recruited to attend the school within the Jesuit ideals professed by St. Ignatius—a commitment to serving the oppressed and disenfranchised (Scibilia et al., 2009). Furthermore, the students in this study demonstrated significant resilience in dealing with racial micro-aggressions, yet they never revealed how the school has changed as a result of their presence and racialized experiences. Thus, perhaps the question is not how do these students understand their experiences and make meaning of them, but rather how future research should focus more on ways that Jesuit schools in urban communities can embrace a true social justice mission, as expressed by St. Ignatius and other members of the Jesuit community who have given their lives in the quest for justice for those who have been marginalized by the larger society.

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## IMPACT OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL MATH ACADEMY ON LEARNING AND ATTITUDES OF MINORITY MALE STUDENTS IN AN URBAN DISTRICT

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### Abstract

A growing number of single-gender and after-school programs for youth continue to gain popularity within schools despite little empirical research regarding how these programs should be designed to achieve maximum success. The present study examined the effectiveness of a comprehensive middle school male academy program in terms of student achievement and attitudes toward learning. The results indicated that students who participated in the program improved their algebra readiness and interest in mathematics. Furthermore, there were gains in students' perceived importance of assignment completion, attitudes toward learning, goals for college, and self-concept. Implications for similar programs and future studies are discussed.

**Keywords:** Middle School, Math Achievement, Minority Males, After-School Programs

Educational achievement and attainment of high school students has become a national concern particularly in regards to the widening performance gaps by gender (Gurin & Stephens, 2007; Hall, 2006; Noguera, 2003) and ethnicity (Howard, 2010; Singham, 1998). Overall, male minority students have fallen behind female white students in academic success (National Council for Crime and Delinquency, 2008). African-American and Hispanic male high school students are dropping out of school at higher rates and are graduating at lower rates than white female counterparts (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2007), which in turn has had a negative effect on university enrollments of male students (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). In addition, male students, as a group, have significantly

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more referrals for discipline problems, seem to be less motivated, show less maturity, and spend less time studying than female students (Buchanan & Grabmeier, 2008). In fact, minority boys get the majority of Ds and Fs and make up 80 percent of the discipline referrals (Gurian & Stephens, 2007; Townsend, 2000). Boys are also more likely to be referred to and placed in special education courses (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Skiba, 2005; Taylor & Lorimer, (2002).

Numerous and complex reasons may explain the achievement gap, such as a lack of academic and cultural literacy, college knowledge, mentors, positive relationships, and connections to the community (Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007) and lack of positive attitudes such as self-efficacy toward mathematics (Usher, 2009). Various studies have addressed the importance of students' positive dispositions, which incorporate a tendency to reflect, a willingness to explore, confidence in the subject matter, perseverance through a challenge and interest that is sustained over time (Bagley, & Gallenberger, 1992). In mathematics, *productive disposition* refers to the tendency to perceive mathematics as both useful and worthwhile, to believe that steady effort in learning mathematics pays off, and to see oneself as an effective learner and doer of mathematics (National Research Council, 2001). Successful school initiatives to close the achievement gap shy away from "one-size fits all" solutions and move toward comprehensive approaches and systemic reform that benefit the entire school culture (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004). In mathematics intervention, researchers suggest incorporating motivators to help students regulate their behavior and sustain attention to work hard at their academics (Fuchs, Fuchs, Prentice, Burch, Hamlett, & Owen, 2003). The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a comprehensive middle school male math academy program in an urban school district. More specifically, this study explores the extent to which a middle school math academy improves male students' learning in mathematics as well as general attitudes toward schooling.

At the start of the twenty first century gender equity was not a new topic in regard to girls, but it was relatively new for boys (Taylor & Lorimer, 2002). Boys still struggle to attain the same level of academic achievement as girls, and they often do not have the same social network of support in health care and other social services as those that girls have available to them (Edley & Ruiz del Valasco, 2010). Also, females are more likely to attend and graduate from college than males (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Boys tend to suffer disproportionately from familial challenges such as limited financial or social resources or worse yet, not having a father at home (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). Thus, an emphasis on boys' academic success is a clearly indicated need based on the literature.

### **Elements of Successful Math Programs for At-Risk Students**

According to the final report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel (NMAP) (2008), "There are large, persistent disparities in mathematics achievement related to race and income—disparities that are not only devastating for individuals and families but also project poorly for the nation's future" (p. xii). The report suggests an urgent need to develop effective programs that address social, affective, and motivational factors to reduce mathematics achievement gaps among minority groups (NMAP, 2008).

Based on research about supporting at-risk students, the Institute of Education Sciences issued recommendations for assisting students struggling with mathematics. The

recommendations included screening all students to identify at-risk students, using instructional materials that focus intensely on in-depth treatment mathematics, being explicit and systematic in instruction, using common underlying structures for problem solving, using visual representations, building fluent retrieval of basic facts, monitoring the progress of students, and including motivational strategies in Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (Gersten et al., 2009). According to Fuchs, Fuchs, Craddock et al. (2008), Tier 2 students receive supplemental small group mathematics instruction aimed at building targeted mathematics proficiencies.

Federal reports on low achievement in math indicate that only 39 percent of students in the United States are at or above the “proficient” level in grade 8 and only 23 percent by grade 12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Although students in the United States face difficulties in mathematics learning, many researchers and mathematics educators identified the learning of algebra as a central stumbling block (NMAP, 2008). The NMAP report also indicated that as the achievement gap in mathematics varies widely among different ethnic groups, starting in middle school, the need for effective intervention programs remains high for students at-risk of academic failure.

Algebra is one of five important standards from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) throughout the K-12 mathematics curriculum. NCTM (2000) standards stress the need to make school mathematics, especially algebra, available for all students because “algebra is often referred to as a gatekeeper to a college education and the careers such education affords” (Kilpatrick & Izsak, 2008, p.11). It has been established that the achievement gap for minority students can lead to significant economic gaps. Being without algebra skills can limit life outcomes, especially for families where multiple-generations have not attended college (Singham, 1998).

### **Middle School Male Math Academy (MS/MMA) Program**

The Middle School Male Math Academy MS/MMA program exists in a large urban district in California. The overarching goals of the program includes “enhancing awareness of issues that impact male students, increasing academic engagement and achievement levels of male students, with an emphasis on algebra readiness, as well as increasing opportunities for boys to interact and learn directly from college educated men, which will increase self-confidence and awareness” (Brown, n.d.).

The program had two components: one attitudinal with an emphasis on leadership and the second that emphasizes the academic component to enhance students’ math achievement and to prepare them for subsequent math courses. Generally, students met for one hour twice a week after school. Once a month a session was devoted to leadership and life skills, and students participated in activities and discussions, and had the opportunity to hear selected guest speakers (Hernandez, 1995). Discussion topics included leadership development, college readiness, and time management. Students also participated in community service activities and field trips to high schools and colleges. The other sessions focused on algebra readiness and math skills development, utilizing a curriculum planned by district math coordinators and teachers. The program included algebra readiness tutorial sessions along with hands-on applied activities. At each session, students played math games, completed math puzzles, competed with playing cards, and utilized a Jeopardy-style game based on algebraic concepts.

## Methods

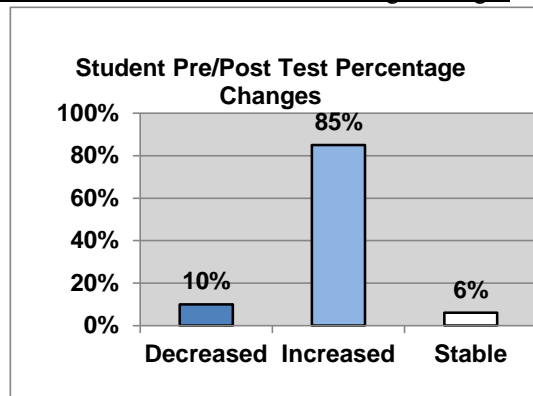
The MS/MMA program was implemented at 12 middle schools in an urban school district in California, in which approximately 240 male students are served. An average of 20 students were in the program at each middle school. The program participants were selected if they were identified as low-performing male students, with a grade point average of 1.0-2.5 and California Standards Test scores of Basic and Below Basic in mathematics. They also demonstrated potential for academic and social growth as assessed by site administration. The program as a whole had a demographic make-up of 60% Hispanics, 30% African Americans, 4% Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 6% others.

The study included the review and analysis of pre and post student math assessments and post-survey results related to student engagement, attitude toward schooling, and academic progress and aspirations for the 2009-2010 school year. Pre and post-district math assessments consisted of the administration of the practice second quarter exam as the pre-test and the administration of the actual second quarter exam as the post-test. The district research office administered a survey on the MS/MMA Program and published its results. It was based on responses from 150 middle school students who participated in the program. The survey topics included class preparedness, self-image, attitude toward learning, and future educational goals. Results of this evaluation should be interpreted with caution, as there were uncontrolled threats to internal and external validity.

## Results

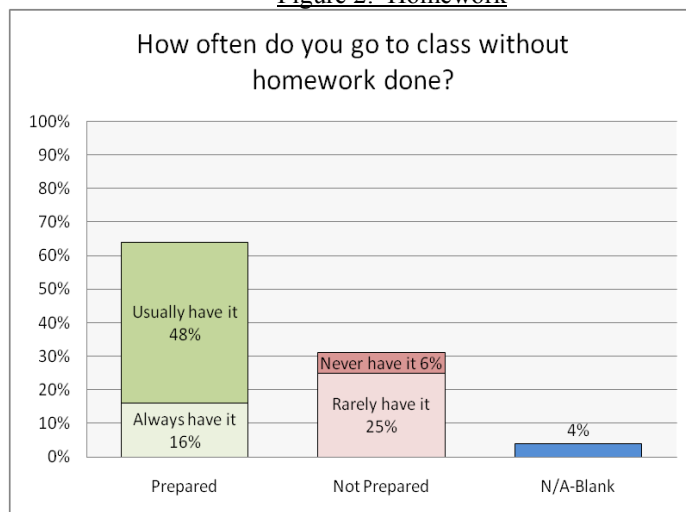
**Test Changes.** The MS/MMA was utilized as a targeted Tier 2 intervention to address, namely, the challenges that minority males were facing as indicated by their low scores or grades in mathematics. Pre and post district math assessments were used to measure the impact of the MS/MMA program on student achievement. The overwhelming majority of students, 85%, improved their district math assessment standard scores, while 10% of students showed decreased skills. Of those 85% of students, the average standard score increase was 26%. However, students' regular math class grades remained unchanged between the initial and final grades (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Student Pre/Post Test Percentage Changes



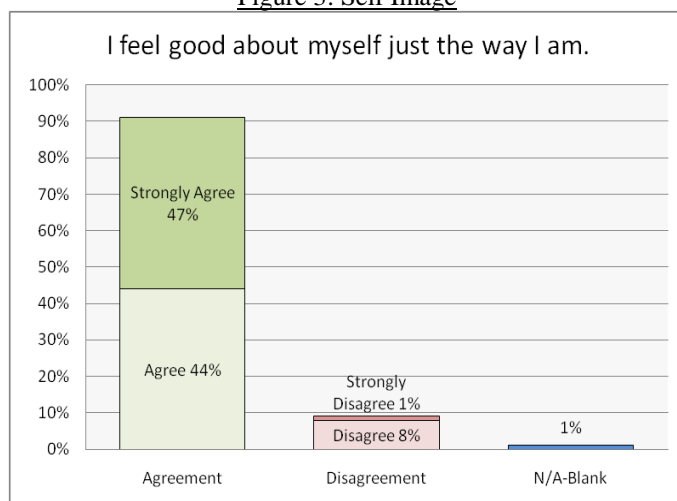
**Student Attitudinal Outcomes.** Post-survey results at the year-end of the MS/MMA showed positive results. The survey topics included class preparedness, self-image, attitude toward learning, and future educational goals. The results were as follows: Almost two-thirds of the students (64%) stated they usually or always had their homework done before class (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Homework

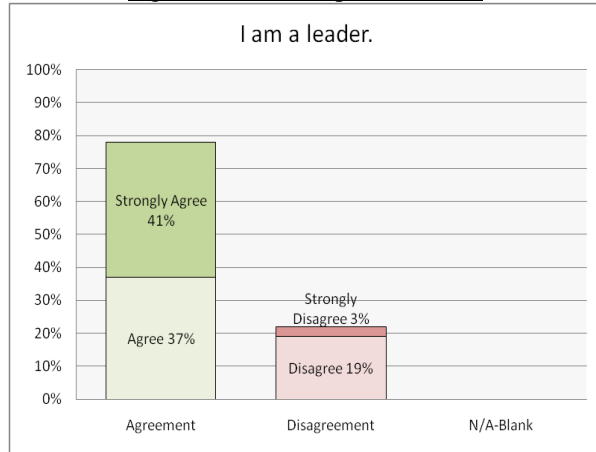


The vast majority of students had a positive self-image. They felt good about themselves (91%) and affirmed that they were leaders (78%) (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Self Image



**Figure 4: Leadership Affirmation**



**Positive School Attitudes.** The overwhelming majority of students had a positive attitude toward learning. Over 90% of the students thought it was important to make good grades and believed the work they did at school was important to their future (see Figures 5 and 6).

**Figure 5: Importance of Grades**

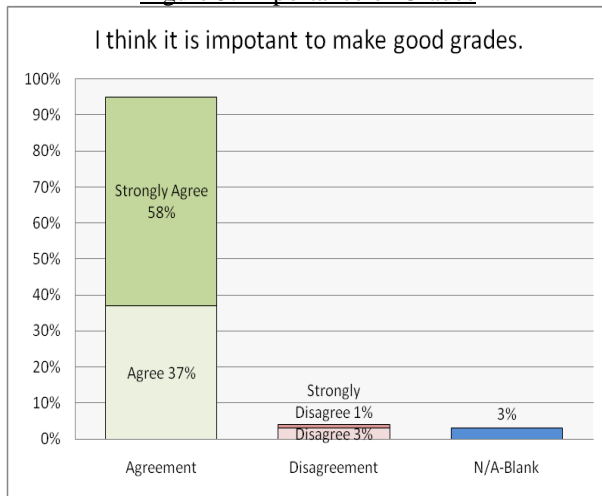
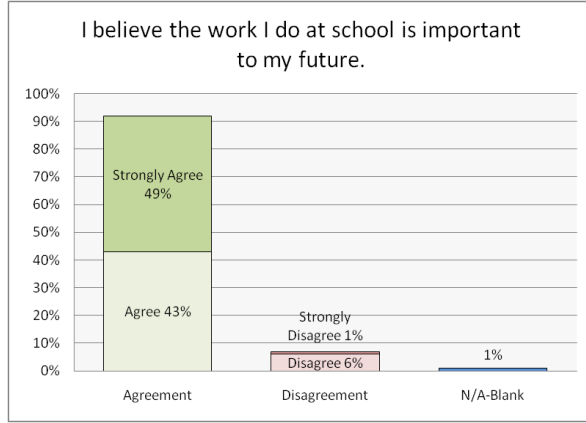
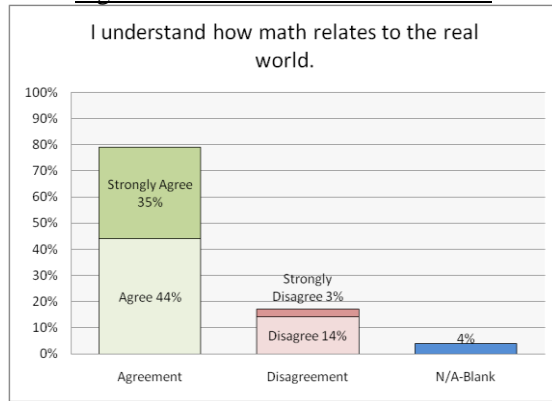


Figure 7 shows that 79% of students also understood the importance of mathematics and Figure 8 shows that 88% of students knew that they could do well if they studied and practiced often.

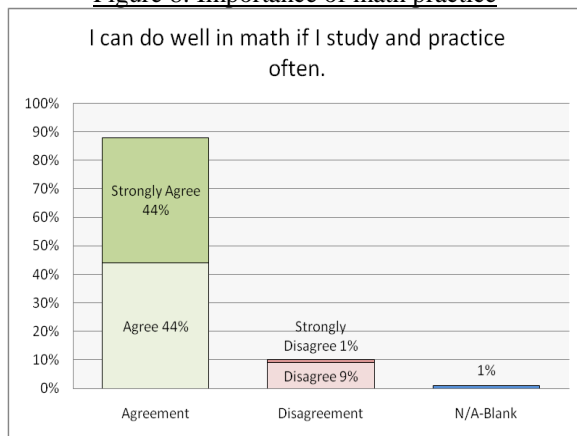
**Figure 6: School Work and Future**



**Figure 7: View of Math in Real World**



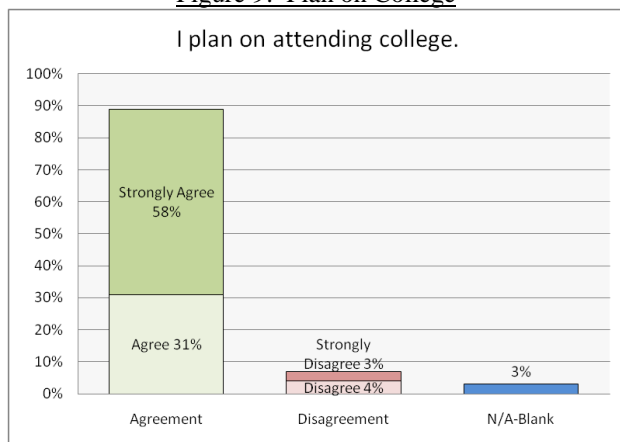
**Figure 8: Importance of math practice**



**College Plan.** The vast majority of students, 89%, planned on attending college. Although the program participants were identified as low-performing students, they demonstrated positive future aspirations (see Figure 9).

The math component of the MS/MMA program appears to be moderately effective. Students gained a greater interest in math and a new sense of empowerment with their math aptitude. The leadership component, however, was more challenging to measure. Upon general review of the program, there was little discussion and few activities related to leadership noted. It may be that recent budget cuts had a detrimental impact on that portion of the program. Teachers in the program mentioned the declining enrollment and retention, and they also attributed it to recent school-wide changes due to budget constraints.

**Figure 9: Plan on College**



**Discussion**

The results in this study show that students from the MS/MMA program not only improved their math scores on the district math assessments, but also felt their interest in math had been energized. Discussion will address attitudinal results and achievement gain, which was contextualized in our literature review by addressing the achievement gap between boys and girls, minority males in particular; elements of successful math programs for at-risk students; and the importance of algebra in middle school. Also, ideas on how to enhance the leadership component of the program will be discussed. Finally, implications for researchers will be given at the end of this section.

**Impact of Positive Results on the Achievement Gap**

Minority youth and the achievement gap have been of great concern to researchers (Singham, 1998) and practitioners (Skiba, 2005). The finding that over 91 percent of the participants indicated a high self-concept as demonstrated by the statement, "I feel good about myself just the way I am," is not surprising according to researchers in this area (Graham, Taylor, & Hundley, 1998). Although counter-intuitive, nearly two

decades of research (Graham, 1994) has shown that underrepresented minority students, especially males (Taylor & Graham, 2007), have had high levels of self-conceptualization, even though they may struggle at academics. This finding is thus consistent with the literature. Moreover, their perceptions of admirable and respected peers led to their nominating low-achieving peers in the aforementioned studies. This is in stark contrast to African American and Latina girls, as well as white boys who nominated high achieving peers as respected and admired.

At the beginning of the program there were concerns that students did not value the importance of education. Results have shown that 95 percent of the students agreed that it is important to make good grades and that over 92 percent of the students believed that their schoolwork was important to their life. However, *academic performance* is not just attitudes. It is one of several components of school engagement, which should be considered when qualifying or quantifying growth in this area for students as well as staff member's promotion of school engagement. Therefore the suggestion for continued success with the program is to emphasize the importance of students' reinforcing each other as peers who are high achievers and ready for college, despite the real or perceived obstacles of systemic racism as indicated by statistics in the school or cultural setting (Rueda, 2004). These include low math or other academic scores for minority males, lack of resources, and/or limited achievement of peers who are the same gender and background but a few years older than them. In the tradition of Paulo Freire (1970), students must become the ones who encourage not only each other but also others in their community if a substantive change is to be made in a district with a trend of low achievement of by minority boys.

Again, another positive indicator is that 89 percent of the students planned on attending college. An emphasis on "border crossing" or "multi-cultural navigation" may help the final 11 percent of students to see college as a more viable option (Carter, 2005; McKinney & Denton, 2006). Hall (2006) recommended a school-based mentoring curriculum that includes; arts-based activities, reflective writing, conflict resolution skill-development, discussion of relevant social-cultural topics, brotherhood, and a critical analysis of the boys' current situations within the district and the city. Another recommendation is a sense of agency (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and purpose in reaching out to younger students to help them navigate their path towards graduation and the potential of collegiate success (Perry, 2003).

### **Elements of Success in Math Programs for At-Risk Students**

Successful school initiatives use comprehensive approaches (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004), that focus on promoting positive disposition (National Research Council, 2001) to motivate students to work hard at their academics (Fuchs et al, 2006). This program improved students' positive dispositions relating to their attitude, confidence, and beliefs. One incident of important improvement from this project was that about 64 percent of students usually or always submitted their homework on time, a crucial skill needed for academic success (Learning Points Associates, 2009). Miller (2001) suggested hands-on activities are very important in this type of program particularly because they engage students who may be discouraged and "turned off" by school. The mathematics hands-on activities in this program made a connection between math content and real-world application, which enhanced students' belief in mathematics learning.



## Enhancing Leadership Components of the Program for Educators

Although it is significant that 81 percent of the young men saw themselves as leaders, nearly 20 percent of the students left the program still unsure about their roles as leaders. This may also be due to developmental ages. There was a lack of consistency of “leadership” or “character” education across the programs. However, as (Vigil, 2002) noted, when “segregated, underfunded, and inferior schools” do not provide tangible opportunities in impoverished neighborhoods, “the motivations and strategies for seeking higher status begin in the family but are formally forged in the education systems”. However, if that status is not attained, Vigil stated, “being pragmatic, [students] assume they won’t realize their dreams” (p. 9). Soon, “street socialization alienates youths from what is learned in the schools, while societal discrimination and economic injustice further endure allegiance to convention commitments” (Vigil, 2002, p.12). Truancy of students who have to drop out due to suspensions, lack of high school credits toward a diploma, or apathy can lead to students coming together for negative reasons such as gang activity. Fortunately, this was a middle school program, which can begin to highlight the need for long-term planning as well as reinforcing peer achievement that can help generate success and better engage students in school.

Eaton (2010) stated that issues to address in staff development include concentrated neighborhood poverty and understanding of environments that give rise to disruptive behavior, which often leads administrators, faculty, and staff to adopt policies that seek to control students rather than include them. Therefore, to eliminate racial and gender disparities in school discipline, educators must learn to recognize and respond to racial biases when they are making discipline and academic programming decisions (Rueda, 2004; Skiba, 2005; Townsend, 2000). The recommendations here were to provide ongoing professional development and coaching for teachers and to develop a clear set of student learning objectives in the area of culturally competent leadership development (Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey, 2007).

## Suggestions for Similar Studies

According to Jimmerson, Campos, and Greif (2003), the measure of academic performance in mathematics, overall GPA, and students’ own indicators of importance are in line with the construct of student engagement in the literature. Other indicators such as *classroom performance*, which may include individual on-task behavior, assignment completion, and/or referrals to the front office, should be included as well. Other areas connected to school engagement are the frequency and quantity of *extracurricular engagement and whether* students being more involved in school activities will bring out another facet of school engagement. As indicated earlier, *interpersonal relationships* regarding peers’ admiration and respect for academic-success should be reviewed. Finally, the *school community* tie should be included and could be measured by questions that ask about students’ feelings toward the school and the school community members.

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**INITIATING OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE PRESERVICE TEACHERS’  
PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MENTORING  
AT-RISK ADOLESCENTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Providing preservice teachers in urban settings with authentic educational experiences may be an effective approach in preparing them to teach diverse students. Therefore, this investigation examined preservice teachers’ perceptions of mentoring at-risk high school students. Data analysis reflected preservice teachers’ positive experiences and their role as future teachers. The social interaction with at-risk students fostered a deeper understanding of the importance of relationship building and helped to clear teachers’ negative assumptions about at-risk students. This study suggests that preservice teachers in urban settings may enhance their pedagogical knowledge and course work learning by mentoring at-risk students.

**Keywords:** Disposition Development, Mentoring, Developing a Pedagogical Lens

Nationally, policy makers and practitioners face challenges in addressing the demand for preparing preservice teachers to succeed in diverse classroom settings (Barnes, 2006). Educator preparation programs must meet these challenges and equip preservice teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Akiba, 2011). Therefore, how can teacher preparation programs respond to this critical challenge? Mentoring at-risk students in urban settings may provide aspiring teachers with a realistic perspective on the challenges associated with teaching struggling adolescents.

The purpose of my investigation was to examine preservice teachers’ perceptions about mentoring at-risk students and their influence on teachers’ pedagogical knowledge. Personal interaction with adolescents may be a way to simulate future classroom challenges for preservice teachers and to better prepare them to meet the needs of diverse students (Garza, in press; Bullen, Faarruggia, Gómez, Hebaishi, & Mahmood, 2010). Although school/university-based mentoring initiatives for at-risk urban students have been successful and accepted as an approach to improve the educational preparation of aspiring teachers (Fresko & Wertheim, 2006), research that examines preservice teachers’ development through mentoring at-risk students is limited.

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## Youth Mentoring and Teacher Preparation

Youth mentoring, a process whereby a young person is guided, provided with instructional support, and encouraged by a much older peer or an adult, is common nationwide (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Effective youth mentoring relationships, based on mutual trust and empathy, may improve self-esteem, social skills, and academic experiences (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006; Rhodes, 2005; Schwartz, Lowe, & Rhodes, 2012; Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011). Although other researchers (Lee, Germain, Lawrence, & Marshall, 2010) have suggested that mentoring may influence mentors' perceptions and interactions with mentees and provide positive and valuable experiences for preservice teachers (Rose & Jones, 2007), improving the academic performance and success of the mentee (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005; Wyatt, 2009) is generally the focus of school-based initiatives.

Mentoring programs for preservice teachers are introduced and developed through university and public school partnerships nation-wide (Huling & Resta, 2001). Research has suggested that programs that include mentoring and tutoring can expand preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions through practical experience (Fresko & Wertheim, 2001; Hedrick, McGee, & Mittag, 2000; McCluskey, Noller, Lamoureux, & McCluskey, 2004). For example, Bullen, Faarruggia, Gómez, Hebaishi, and Mahmood, (2010) reported that preservice teachers enhanced their pedagogical knowledge and improved their professionalism through their mentoring experiences. Some universities enrich preservice teachers' educational experiences through service-learning projects that include mentoring disadvantaged students (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Allessandri, 2002). One study (Hughes & Dykstra, 2008) involved 29 university students enrolled in an elective service-learning course that focused on mentoring students at a predominantly black urban high school. Preservice teachers developed a high comfort level interacting with students who were culturally different from them, improved their self-esteem as mentors, and recognized the challenges of teaching in an economically depressed environment. In a similar study (McCabe & Miller, 2003), 133 preservice teachers volunteered to mentor elementary children, predominantly located in high poverty environments. Preservice teachers enhanced their communication skills, improved their confidence as mentors, and adjusted their negative perceptions about economically-disadvantaged students.

In another study, university students participated in a service learning project that included mentoring as one aspect of the initiative (Meyer, 1997). Findings indicated that preservice teachers increased their confidence as mentors and cultivated genuine relationships with students. On a much larger scale, 299 preservice teachers volunteered to mentor lower middle class and poor students, ages 3-6, through the Perach Project in Israel (Fresko & Wertheim, 2006). Benefits included an increased empathy toward the students, knowledge about children, growth in problem-solving, and relationship building. While building self-esteem, developing cross-cultural appreciation, and improving communication skills were highlighted in these studies as benefits for preservice mentors, there is limited research about the pedagogical benefits for preservice teachers.

## Methods

This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to examine preservice teachers' written responses to an open-ended questionnaire about their experiences mentoring at-risk students. This interpretative study was framed within the theoretical underpinnings of a model of youth mentoring and the mentoring process (Bey & Holmes, 1992; Odell & Huling, 2000; Rhodes, 2005). Mentoring provides a model for one-to-one interaction, especially when assistance is lacking or inadequate, with the assumption that the protégé will gain support for growth and development (Caldarella, Gomm, Shatzer, & Wall, 2010; Cohen, 1999). *At-risk* in this study is defined as a freshman high school student consistently demonstrating academic difficulty in previous grade levels and/or failing to meet a passing standard on state-mandated assessments.

This investigation focused on the mentoring experiences of preservice teachers during their field-based internship. The following questions guided this study: 1) Does mentoring at-risk adolescents enhance preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and preparation? 2) Do preservice teachers perceive mentoring at risk-students as beneficial?

### Participants

Participants, in their early to mid-twenties, included 47 high school preservice teachers, 21 females (2 African Americans, 4 Latinas, and 15 whites) and 26 males (1 African American, 6 Latinos, 18 whites, and 1 other), from different content areas enrolled in a field-based course at a large southwestern university. The participants were from middle-class backgrounds and included a married female student, and a single father. The field-based component was a requirement and students usually enrolled the semester before their student teaching practicum. Purposeful and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) were used to identify the participants.

### Procedures

The high school's academic dean selected the students (21 Latinos and 5 Whites) to participate in the mentoring sessions. Then the teacher candidates were randomly matched with one or two high school students because there were more adolescents than teacher candidates. As part of their field experience, the participants were required to meet every Tuesday for one hour at the school. The mentoring session times varied to avoid having the students miss the same class period every week. Although the participants were primarily responsible for helping their mentee with mathematics and reading comprehension, they also helped students to improve their study habits, to complete homework, or to improve any school-related learning skill. Since the field experience course was one semester, the at-risk adolescents had a different preservice teacher mentor the following semester.

### Data Collection

Data were collected from an open-ended end-of-course survey that participants completed at the end of each respective semester (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The

instrument included the following questions: (a) Considering your pedagogical knowledge, what aspects of your mentoring experience can you connect to teaching and managing students? (b) What are some positive aspects of your mentoring experience? (c) What are some challenges with our mentoring experience? (d) What else would you like to say about your mentoring experience?

### **Data Analysis**

The data sources were analyzed using qualitative data reduction strategies in order to manage, categorize, and interpret data to identify themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). I started with open coding to sift through the data analytically and to reduce the concepts to identify their properties. As I separately read each group of surveys, I made handwritten notes and generated twelve preliminary categories after several readings. Then the preliminary categories were sorted using axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) and placed into six new subcategories. I then sorted and further reduced these subcategories using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and added descriptive statements taken from questionnaires to the new categories. A deeper analysis of the data was then performed by me by comparing initial codes, notes, and descriptive statements to generate the final three themes.

### **Discussion and Findings**

My study suggests that a mentoring initiative implemented to provide instructional assistance to at-risk high school students in urban settings has the potential to enhance preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and preparation. Lee et al. (2010) agreed that practical experiences, designed to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively with a diverse school population are critical to their growth and professional development. Major findings encompassed three themes: (a) developing a pedagogical lens, (b) fostering relationships, and (c) developing dispositions. In the following section, I define the themes and expand on the pedagogical connections preservice teachers perceived as part of the mentoring process.

#### **Developing a Pedagogical Lens**

*Developing a pedagogical lens* refers to preservice teachers' emerging espoused belief about their role as a teacher. According to Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), "An efficacious teacher believes that he or she has the power and ability to produce a desired effect" (p. 319). Teaching a diverse group of students, especially those who struggle or are reluctant to engage in the learning process, poses challenges for educators. Some participants mentioned the skills they used during the mentoring sessions (Meyer, 1997).

I learned about dealing with students who claim they know the material, when they usually only know some part or aspect of it; I can evaluate how well they grasped the material much better, and have practiced some strategies that help determine how much progress they're making.



Employing effective strategies is one aspect associated with the complex dynamics of teaching. Therefore, a teacher must be very familiar with students' academic needs to influence success and achievement.

Another participant stated, "This experience has helped me see the way a student comprehends material. The strategies with scaffolding and prompting have helped with the mentoring process." This statement suggests that the one-to-one interaction with the mentee helped this preservice teacher to connect classroom instruction with practice, which in turn, promoted their social and cognitive growth and engaged them as active learners in the process (Schmidt, Marks, & Derrico 2004).

A majority of the preservice teachers reported that working with at-risk students was challenging but ultimately improved their learning. One participant said,

It definitely made me aware of how much of a task it is to keep students focused and interested. It was a great hands-on approach to experience challenges and situations that may take place in a class setting. It is important to always have something for them to do so that they don't feel bored and can enjoy the class. Furthermore, it made it possible to see how relevancy is a big deal to the students.

This comment reflects the preservice teacher's reflection beyond the immediate context and suggests the impact on their lens as an educator (Caldarella et al, 2010).

Participants also commented on the effectiveness of using wait time with their mentee, establishing relevancy to maintain interest in the content area, and actively engaging the student for purposes of motivation. Mentoring adolescents provided a space for preservice teachers to explore the process of diagnosing students' needs, selecting the appropriate response, and employing appropriate interventions. These findings are in concert with research (Hedrick et al., 2000) that has supported hands-on-experience as a means to foster text-book learning.

### **Fostering Relationships**

*Fostering relationships* refers to the notion of establishing rapport with students through meaningful interaction. An overwhelming majority of the participants perceived the mentoring experience as positive and rewarding (Rose & Jones, 2007). This finding is in concert with other research (Fresko & Wertheim, 2006; Grineski, 2003) that has suggested the importance of building trust and establishing a comfort level with students before learning can occur. One of the participants mentioned

I saw that it was hard to connect with the student at first, but once I was able to find out what worked for us, we did great. I realize that I am going to have to do this with each of my students.

This comment reflects how the mentoring experience provided the context for preservice teachers to understand the critical nature of teacher/student relationships; it reveals a genuine caring attitude about the mentee, but more importantly, it suggests a reciprocal learning experience.

The participants also stated that the interaction with the mentee was beneficial to their pedagogical understanding consistent with findings from other research (Bullen, et

al., 2010; Garza, in press). For instance, one participant remarked, “I got to know one student much more intimately as far as their goals, ideas on education and their struggles.” Another stated that he appreciated “getting to know how students feel about school, and knowing that I need to understand all students’ home life and how it could affect school.” These comments reflect preservice teachers’ willingness not only to accept others, but also to recognize the uniqueness of their mentee. Mentoring at-risk students may promote a deeper understanding of the critical nature of a trusting relationship (Rhodes, 2005) and knowing the nuances of students can provide opportunities to validate students during the learning process (Gay, 2010).

The relationships that teachers establish with students influence students’ perceptions about school and learning (Osterman & Freese, 2000). Getting to know students is a critical aspect of engaging students. “I learned that you have to make sure you connect with the students because if you don’t they will close up and not want to talk” expressed another mentor. This suggests that preservice teacher mentors were excited and willing to connect with the at-risk adolescents. When teacher behavior reflected an attitude that was inviting and supportive, students were more apt to participate in the learning process because they wanted to be there (Garza, Ryser & Lee, 2009).

### **Developing Dispositions**

*Developing dispositions* refers to preservice teachers’ perceptions of at-risk students. Preconceived assumptions tend to influence what we think of those who may be economically, ethnically, linguistically, academically, and socially different from us. As a participant stated, “It was an experience where I got to build a relationship with a student that I would normally consider outside my circle. He changed my point of view about certain types of students.” Preservice teachers experienced the relational aspects of teaching that helped them to adjust their personal assumptions about the adolescents (Hedrick et al. 2000). This insight is especially important because student mentoring can serve to establish a positive mental paradigm that can deter deficit thinking about struggling students (Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

Some participants recognized the uniqueness of students, resulting in a positive perspective toward them and others in general (Grineski, 2003; McCabe & Miller, 2003; Valverde, 2006). “It showed me that not necessarily all kids who fail the TAKS test [state assessment] are all-around academically challenged. She was extremely smart and driven,” commented one participant. This statement reflects a shift from a negative conception about students who are labeled academically deficient. Preservice teachers who adjust their deficit thinking during their preparation phase may be more inclined to empathize with struggling students and help them to succeed (Crutcher, 2007).

Mentoring also provided a space for preservice teachers to engage in a personal approach to learn more about their mentee’s personal life and consequently helped to change their initial perception. One of the participants explained:

I was able to get her to open up about many things. When [I was] trying to teach her she said ‘I just do not get it.’ I tried different ways, and for some reason [or] other [they] worked better. She is a great student [who] just needs to be motivated. Such comments support the need for teachers to build trusting relationships with students,

a necessary aspect of student success (Rhodes, 2005; Ripski, LoCasale-Crouch, & Decker, 2011). The majority of the participants embraced the opportunity to work with struggling adolescents and valued the mentoring experience. This is critical in the classroom because students who perceive an unresponsive teacher may become disengaged from the learning process, resulting in underachievement or leaving school (Kitano & Lewis, 2005).

### **Limitations**

My study is limited by the gathering of data collected over two semesters at one large high school. Participants mentoring at-risk students in other educational institutions and geographical areas might encounter a different set of circumstances that may influence their perceptions and experiences. While the findings add to the extant literature on mentoring at-risk students, caution should be taken when generalizing the conclusions from this study to preservice teachers in diverse school settings due to the small sample size and interpretation of the findings. Finally, other researchers might label the themes differently.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Preservice teachers participated in a mentoring initiative that provided them with opportunities to interact emotionally, socially, and academically with high school students as a means to further their pedagogical knowledge. Developing quality educators requires a combination of course-work instruction and field-based experiences that provide preservice teachers opportunities to authentically apply their learning in urban settings. Requiring mentoring experiences with at-risk high school students may be an effective approach to enhancing preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and preparation (Fresko & Wertheim, 2001; Hedrick, et. al., 2000; McCluskey, Noller, Lamoureux, & McCluskey, 2004).

Although limited studies have addressed the connections of pedagogical knowledge to mentoring at-risk high school adolescents, research has suggested that mentoring can contribute to students' development (Garza, in press; Grineski, 2003). While working with at-risk students affords aspiring teachers a realistic perspective on the dynamics associated with teaching, student mentoring also contributes to their professional agency and provides a social space for them to interact successfully with students (Price & Nelson, 2011). These findings illuminate a potential approach to enhance preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and preparation, extending other research (Bullen et al., 2010) on effective ways to build preservice teachers' capacity. Therefore, it is important for preservice teachers to interact with at-risk adolescents as a starting point to acquire a possible profile of their future students and the challenges that may occur in the classroom.

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## FROM PERCEPTION TO PRACTICE: HOW TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS AFFECT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT

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### Abstract

For youth, schools are simultaneously sites of production, socialization, and development. At school, students learn about race, social values and norms, power, and positionality (Noguera, 2003, p. 443). This “hidden curricula” reinforces social inequities and influences how individual students experience the process of schooling as well as come to understand themselves. School processes that divide students along lines of difference communicate beliefs about those differences and marginalize separated groups. Nowhere is this more damaging than in the case of male African American students, where the intersections of race and gender place them at odds with their environment, resulting in academic underperformance and a disconnection. Although theories like Ogbu’s (1978) “oppositional culture” and Lewis’ (1998) “culture of poverty” make culturalist arguments for the disparate achievement of Black males, the current text will take a structuralist approach, arguing that schools are production sites for inequities that facilitate underachievement in African American males; consequently, teachers exist as agents of the structure who create and maintain a dominant culture through practices that are at odds with the academic productivity of young black males.

**Keywords:** Teachers’ Perceptions, African American males, Academic Achievement,

Teachers’ perceptions shape practices in the classroom and school environment (Skiba, 2002). At the micro level, classrooms and teacher–student interactions within that context influence how students view and respond to schooling and can produce both social and academic disparities. Noguera (2003) argues that “students can be unfairly victimized by the labeling and sorting processes that occur within schools” (p. 442). I contend that these processes are the result of dominant perceptions amongst school personnel—largely teachers, whose daily performance in the classroom and school environment conveys beliefs about the abilities of their Black male students.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what current research has uncovered regarding teachers’ perceptions and the extent to which they guide practices that affect the educational realities of African American males. Specifically, this paper will explore

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the connection between teachers' perceptions and the education of African American boys with a focus on the following question: "How do teachers' perceptions shape practices that influence academic achievement?"

Each year, the Schott Foundation on Public Education (SFPE) releases the Schott Report on Black Males and Education, which provides state and national data on graduation rates, reading proficiencies, special services placements, and discipline percentages for African American school-aged males. In 2010, the report presented data for the 2007-2008 school year, when the national graduation average for Black males was a strikingly low 47 percent (SFPE, 2010). This information alone makes the case for the need for continued research on educational attainment among African American males. Disproportionate placements in special education services, lower rates of inclusion in gifted and talented classes, and an overall gap between African American males' achievement and that of their White male counterparts indicate the need to critically analyze the schooling context, paying particular attention to these unbalanced placement and success rates (Applied Research Center [ARC], 2002).

Research has proven that teachers are the single most important factor in school success for students (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hattie, 2003). The dynamic between a student and his teacher can have tremendous impact on that student—not just because of the teacher's ability to shape the schooling experience, but also because teachers influence academic progression. Focusing on the relationship between African American males and their teachers and the extent to which perceptions shape interactions and guide practice, placement, and promotion are integral steps in creating reform that increases school achievement and mobility for African American males.

### **Early and Biased Assessments**

Focusing on work in education, urban education, and educational psychology, this paper seeks to offer both an educational and psychosocial lens to issues related to teacher–student interactions as well as elucidate concerns and challenges facing African American school-aged males. Educational research discusses the current educational reality of African American males, noting instances of lower academic achievement and engagement in schooling as early as elementary school. Davis (2003) noted that students are assessed and labeled early in their school career and that such labels have implications for academic success down the line. Early and biased assessments along with the implementation of common exclusionary practices within educational institutions influence the educational experiences of African American males, causing detachment and creating barriers to school success (Davis, 2003; Davis & Jordan, 1995; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Noguera, 2003). Finally, reports on black male achievement statistics present data on a widening achievement gap, heightened dropout percentages, and—most disheartening—inequitable discipline and special needs placements. Studies in education and educational psychology highlight teachers' attitudes and appraisals of African American males' abilities as well as the role that these assessments play in determining interactions with students and overall student access to high-quality and rigorous coursework. A careful analysis of these texts will offer insights into teachers' perceptions and practice as well as African American males' achievement and experiences connected to these practices.



I begin this paper by looking at the importance of the school environment and teachers' perceptions as well as outlining how teachers' perceptions are often shaped by dominant ideologies and stereotypes. Inequitable practices that result from such judgments will be discussed with emphasis on student identity development. This section argues that communicated expectations are often deterministic for students who understand themselves through their exchanges with others. Lastly, I present data from studies on the connection between African American males' educational attainment and teachers' perceptions. My final sections will focus on issues not covered in this text as well as suggestions for reform, looking specifically at teacher training as an integral component for creating a teaching force that is highly reflective and aware of the social and academic needs of their students.

### **The School, Teachers' Perceptions, and Educational Practice**

The structure and culture of schools reify categories of difference and promote differential treatment. Noguera (2003) asserted that students' ethnic or socioeconomic background governs how students are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) and Ferguson (2003) concluded that students with higher SES were judged more positively by teachers than those with lower SES, although IQ scores were less likely to align with teachers' predictions. They also found that race became a deterministic factor in teachers' perceptions of students' ability, with minority students being regarded as less capable despite demonstrating achievement comparable to their non-minority peers. These biases often have implications for teacher-student interactions and affect curricular and instructional opportunities for students.

Students are assigned to various educational pathways as early as elementary school. Such ability-based grouping is largely a reflection of teachers' judgments (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). As a result, students of color—specifically, African American males—are largely underrepresented in enrichment programs and college preparatory courses and are given their assignments at the hands of teachers who underestimate their abilities. This leads to higher rates of placement in remedial or special needs classrooms. Assigning African American males to special education courses has been often associated with teachers' misinterpretations of behavioral, movement, and verbal patterns in the classroom (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). For instance, male African American students with a “stroll” or culturally representative movement are more likely to be perceived as low achieving and recommended for special education placement by teachers (Neal et al., 2003).

Harry and Anderson (1994) argued that initial special need assignments are normally related to cultural preferences for physical and verbal behaviors that are highly racialized as well as socialized. “Teachers are driven by the structure of schools, which calls for control, homogeneity, and the inculcation of socially sanctioned behaviors and language” (p. 610). School norms prioritize qualities like acquiescence and passivity in gender and racial minorities, and teachers are charged with the task of extinguishing conduct in opposition to these qualities and replacing it with more favorable behaviors. When students prove to be less malleable to this conformity, they are labeled and given alternate placements.

Although not directly discussed in this paper, it is important to note the additional challenge that African American males face as they confront the construct of an ideal student alongside gender norms. The conflict between Eurocentric maleness, which stresses aggressive and competitive behavior and school-based norms place African American males in a precarious condition as they attempt to locate themselves (White & Cone, 1999). They are subject to punishment when emulating their White male peers and experience micro-aggressions at the hands of school personnel who consider their actions to be the result of cultural and racial differences. Thus, the young men struggle to negotiate their identity in the presence of standards and practices that position them further from rewards and educational success.

Evidence from numerous school districts indicates that, even when male African American students do not represent a large percentage of the school population, they endure the most district suspensions (Davis, 2003; SFPE, 2010). Teachers function as a decisive component in the suspension process, and suspensions are often the result of classroom interactions shaped by bias. One Hoover High School student recalls an instance where he and other minority students were not only treated disrespectfully by teachers, but also punished with a suspension when they persisted in a request to sit near the front of the class in order to see the blackboard more clearly (ARC, 2002). Black male students are often labeled defiant and have few protections against biased actions (ARC, 2002). These actions are commonly the result of the perceived “toughness” of male African American students that can evoke fear school personnel (Noguera, 2003). Such fear is managed and overcome through punishments and policies that criminalize Black boys (Monroe, 2005).

Implicit in differential treatment is value assignments based on socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Students learn the valuation of their SES, gender, and race assignment when they receive either preferential or unfavorable treatment as a result (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). “For African American males, who are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, the message is clear [as they sit in] remedial classes or waiting for punishment outside of the principal’s office” (Noguera, 2003, p. 445). These students’ treatment reminds them that they are not valuable and capable learners, but deviants who should be penalized.

### **Importance of Reciprocal Relations**

Teachers decide how they will work with students based on their perceptions of students’ academic or social strengths or weaknesses (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers may respond to students whom they consider difficult by withdrawing supports. The depth of teacher–student relationships are marked by how much teachers enjoy teaching students or the degree to which the relationship is troubled or troubling. Students who have positive reciprocal relationships with teachers are more likely to receive more academic support and have higher outcomes (Ferguson, 2003).

Teachers also provide differing treatment to students whom they believe are hard workers. This attribution is typically applied along the lines of race and socioeconomic status, with poor minority children being perceived as lazy—an assignment readily applied to African American males. Research also shows that teachers—even when they have not communicated negative perceptions of their students—fail to provide African American students with the same positive reinforcement, feedback on mistakes, and

helpful slips of the tongue as they do their White counterparts (Ferguson, 2003; Pollard, 1993). Research also reveals that African American males are subject to lowered expectations by teachers and given less access to rigorous educational materials (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; ARC, 2002; Pollard, 1993). They are less likely to be encouraged to take advanced courses and are provided fewer opportunities for exposure to complex math and science curricula. “Investigations into the academic orientation of Black males students must focus on the ways in which the subjective and objective dimensions of identity related to race and gender are constructed within schools and how these influence academic performance” (Noguera, 2003, p. 441). Because Black males are more likely “to be channeled into marginal roles and to be discouraged from challenging themselves by adults who are supposed to help them,” they often understand little of their actual potential (Noguera, 2003, p. 446). When students’ potential is underestimated in this way, they struggle not only with performance but also with goal setting, key to success (Ferguson, 2003).

### **Glass Ceiling Effect**

Students who come face to face with their perceived limited potential and the practices that result from these perceptions fall victim to glass-ceiling effects, understanding that barriers and impediments to their mobility exist. Although the glass-ceiling effect is not generally applied to the study of education, it is important to note that schooling mirrors society (Nieto, 1999). Discrimination that leads to the glass ceiling effect is imbedded in daily practices that shape the lived experiences of an individual (Jackson & Leon, 2010). These educational practices are built to enforce dominant culture ideologies that stifle and repudiate students of color. They promote the power and privilege of the white middle class and force minority students, for the sake of forming a positive cultural identity, to distance themselves from schooling and reject educational achievement as a marker of success. In addition, constant interaction with stereotypes and limiting policies and practices can weigh on students’ self-esteem and cause them to construct an identity that mirrors expectations or is accepting of failure.

### **Connection between Teachers’ Perceptions and Students’ Achievement**

Nieto (1999) highlighted the casual relationship between current educational environments and academic performance. According to Nieto (1999), schools have failed to create an environment that produces academic success for its minority students. A student’s social as well as academic identity is tied to experiences within the school environment and what those experiences imply. Within a school, the bulk of student interactions are with their teachers; thus, teachers are directly linked to the formation of students’ academic identity and, as a result, their performance. Consequently, a teacher’s impression of a student can have tremendous impact on that student’s achievement.

Students’ awareness of a teacher’s perceptions determines motivation and attachment to school (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). For instance, research shows that students who are exposed to higher expectations will rise to the challenge. In their work “Determinants of School Success Among African American Boys,” Davis and Jordan (1995) used findings from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study to analyze the educational achievement of African American males. Findings suggest that teachers

**Comment [CMT1]:** Why are these in white?

played a large role in African American males' achievement at school. Teacher attendance and motivational abilities were the key determinants of African American males' educational success. The data indicated that, in high school, teachers' expectations inspired achievement among African American males. When teachers lowered expectations, outcomes were sure to follow.

Students who feel more teacher support are more likely to achieve at higher levels, demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills, and have higher concepts of self-ability (Pollard, 1993). Conversely, those who feel less supported by their teachers are less likely to expend energy in classes or to believe that they can be successful in academic schoolwork (Howard, 2002). "If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced" (Noguera, 2003, p. 449). This is especially true for African American students as teachers' perceptions have a significant impact on minority students (Ferguson, 2003). For African American males, a disparity exists between the value they place on education, and the support they feel they receive from adults. In a study of African American students in the Bay Area, Noguera found that African American boys were likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: "My teachers support me and care about my success in their class" (Noguera, 2003). However, almost 90 percent agreed that education and educational success were important to them. Despite how they feel about education, the lack of strong support from teachers intensifies students' underachievement.

Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) found teachers' judgment to be one of the "strong predictors of future achievement" (p. 732). Their longitudinal study focused on children at age 4, 6, 11, and 18, finding that "preschool teachers' over and under-estimates of children's ability...predicated GPA and SAT test-taking in high school 14 years later" (p. 740). Underestimates had the most significant impact with regard to high school GPA, providing evidence that negative expectancy effects are more potent than positive ones. Although additional research is needed to determine exactly how student performance links with judgments of ability, it is important to note that racial and socioeconomic bias plays a role in student evaluation. If teachers' perceptions are biased, but are linked strongly to long-term student success, it is possible that theories of self-fulfilling prophecy apply where perceptions lead to outcomes. Some 9 to 18 percent of variance in student achievement at the end of a school year can be explained by teachers' perceptions, which can be exacerbated by students' continuous encounters with teachers who expect little success (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999).

One study of the influence of teachers' perceptions on African American preadolescents revealed that "teacher perceptions of social skills was a strong predictor of grade point average" (Seyfried, 1998, p. 381). When teachers perceived higher social skills, students received higher grades. In fact, Seyfried (1998) found that "student perceptions of the teacher-student relationship [coupled with] teacher practices" predicted student ability. Seyfried contended that the association between teachers' expectations and outcomes warrant interventions in teacher practice, which could serve to mitigate the effects of perceptions on expectations and practices. Finally, the study discovered that boys—particularly African American boys—were following a negative academic trajectory. Although additional research is needed, teachers' perceptions of boys as less favorable than their female counterparts resulted in lower grade point averages for the boys.

## **Limitations**

Although this paper addresses how teachers' perceptions influence practices that impact African American boys, additional research is needed. This paper dealt largely with teachers' influences, but very little with how students' self-assessments, reactions to teacher-student relationships, ability to navigate social environments (like schools), and degree of help-seeking behaviors can have bearing on school success. Pollard's (1994) study of gender differences in achievement revealed that African American boys are not only less likely to believe that they can do well in school, but are also disinclined to seek help from teachers when they encounter academic or social issues. These tendencies could weigh upon teachers' perceptions and lead to negative classifications and assumptions.

Developing a better understanding of students' perceptions and how they understand support and assistance would be valuable for uncovering divergences in teachers' and students' expectations of relationships. This could enable school personnel to adjust practices or provide clarity to students, which might limit misinterpretations for both teachers and students. Moreover, further study of how students come to understand valuable or helpful academic support is needed as well.

## **Conclusions**

Although Noguera (2003) argued that the solution does not rest solely in changing policies, creating new programs, or opening opportunities to Black males, I believe that school transformation is the starting point. Certainly, Black males may become complicit in their subjugation. However, "scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural factors have profound influence on human behaviors including academic performance" (p. 433). Teachers hold tremendous power in shaping the classroom and school culture; thus, they become agents in the production of student identities. Their ability to call students to higher levels of productivity could assist in creating an alternative Black male self-rooted in academic excellence and long-term achievement.

Ferguson (2003) contended that rigidity in perceptions and underestimation of potential have the most devastating effect on students. If teachers are able to confront and edit their expectations of their students and the relationship between those expectations and practice, it could have immediate and positive ramifications. Structuring teacher training programs that provide the "incentives and supports [teachers] need to set, believe in and pursue higher goals for all students" is the first step in this process (Ferguson, 2003, p. 468). As Monroe (2005) suggested, "race conscious approaches at teacher preparation and professional development levels" constitute further movement toward limiting inequitable practices. I argue that this must be taken a step further. A teacher-training program with the goal of eliminating racialized processes must focus on practitioner inquiry that pushes teachers to honestly interrogate their beliefs about African American students, consider the impact they have on students, and work to create curricula and practices that promote inclusion and consideration of student difference. "In-service professional development efforts focused on discipline should be designed to identify and critique teacher perceptions" (Monroe, 2005, p. 48) and charge teachers with incorporating "culturally responsive" strategies.

Understanding the impact of teachers' perceptions is important to transforming the experiences of Black males in a school environment. However, additional research on the Black male school experience is needed. Although no dearth of research exists on the challenges they face, very little is known about how certain groups of young Black men manage to succeed. The purpose of this paper was not to explore this angle, but continued research on the "resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships" (Noguera, 2003, p. 438) could provide insight into how schools can combine strong school culture and high expectations of all students with training that assists those males in acquiring the resolve necessary to achieve both in and outside of school.

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## PRE-SERVICE TEACHER VISION AND URBAN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

As preservice teachers enter their first teaching experience, they often have perceptions about what teaching will be like based on a vision that is typically linked to their own background and experiences. This study explores the changes in visions of 15 preservice teachers throughout student teaching in an urban environment. The research will discuss five categories that emerged in how students experienced a shift in vision and will offer suggestions for teacher educators on how to proactively prepare preservice teachers for urban student teaching placements.

**Keywords:** Urban, student teaching, vision, preservice teachers

Institutions of higher education face the challenge of preparing teachers ready to enter any classroom environment. Teacher preparation programs typically have the responsibility of understanding preservice teachers' varied and often biased views of urban schools. Students are entering these teacher preparation programs with strong beliefs and ideas about what it means to teach in an urban school (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). Student teaching is one of the most formative experiences in a preservice teachers' program in which visions are malleable. Teacher preparation programs can determine what positively shifts and shapes teacher vision while in urban schools to address misconceptions or replicate high-quality experiences more systematically and proactively.

### Context of the Study

Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the country. *The Connecticut Mirror* (2012) reported on scores from the U.S. Department of Education, noting that the achievement gap between low-income Connecticut students and their more affluent peers continues to be the largest in the nation. The gap between black and Hispanic students and their white peers is also one of the largest in the nation.

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Hartford, the state's capitol, is one of the urban school settings that partner with the University of Connecticut. In addition to being an urban area, Hartford experiences a poverty rate of 29.4 percent and is the home to 35,741 individuals living in poverty. Hartford is one of the poorest cities in the United States, being described by Downs (2007) as the "hole in a generously glazed donut." Surrounded by some of the richest and most resourced towns in the state, many people work in Hartford, but do not live in the city. Often, a short 10-minute drive can mean the difference between being in a highly resourced and achieving school district or a grossly underfunded and struggling one. Ranking eighth as one of the most segregated cities in the country (Pastor, 2012), Hartford offers an opportunity to explore issues of access, equity, poverty, privilege and ethnicity while students simultaneously learn how to teach.

As in other areas of the country, the teacher candidates at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut generally continue to be white women from suburban areas (Borrero, 2011). Many have had little, if any, life experience in urban settings. Gay and Howard (2000) reference the relatively homogenous teaching force and the "demographic divide" that continues to be prevalent in American public education. Preparing preservice teachers to educate students in starkly different districts than where they are from are have experienced, presents unique challenges and opportunities (Banks et al., 2005; Gay & Howard, 2000).

### **Neag School of Education Integrated Bachelors/Master's Program (IB/M)**

The five-year integrated bachelors/master's teacher preparation program is organized around five strands of study: core, clinic, seminar, subject specific pedagogy, and a subject area major in liberal arts. Each cohort averages in size from 120 to 140 new teacher candidates who begin in their junior year. The weekly seminar course is designed to bridge the gap sometimes found between theoretical content (core) and practice (clinic). In seminar, students focus on the analysis and reflection of core as it intersects with clinic. This study focuses on the senior student teaching seminar for students placed in Hartford Public Schools.

### **Urban Student Teaching and Vision**

Research indicates "student teaching [is] the most influential component of professional education" (Berry, Montgomery, Snyder & Center for Teaching, 2008). Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) stated that, "as teachers develop identity, context matters—both in the teacher preparation program and in the practicum where candidates experience classrooms firsthand" (p. 90). Urban schools, often described as linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse, may also be undergoing reform or restructuring and facing complex challenges with funding and retaining teachers. The student teaching experience can be a transformative opportunity for preservice teachers to shape or reshape their vision and perceptions of urban schools. Although some studies report that preservice teachers felt less comfortable in an urban placement (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Stairs, 2008), other studies indicate that a preservice teachers with urban an placements was more likely to feel prepared as a highly qualified teacher and as a teacher in an urban school as opposed to students who had placements in suburban settings (Singer, Catapano, & Huisman, 2010). At the close of the urban practicum, new

value and insights emerged for teacher candidates (Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008).

Vision has been mentioned by researchers in relationship to various skills and dispositions necessary for effective teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hammerness, 2006). Types of visions teacher educators have encouraged us to consider in preparing new teachers are curricular, organizational versus personal, and individual versus program. Perhaps the most important type of vision we need to consider in preparing educators is what Hammerness (2006) referred to as a “flexible vision.” Flexible vision can also be considered an adaptability or resilience applied to teaching. Teachers have stated that after completing an urban placement, they were struck by a change in vision, viewed themselves as a teacher, and felt that successful teaching required a level of reciprocal learning between teacher and student (Merseth, Sommer & Dickstein, 2008). While vision has been explored in relation to *inservice* teachers, little has been done to consider the development, shifts, and opportunities that can occur from studying vision in *preservice* teachers. The consideration of preservice teachers’ visions and experiences are important for the development of enhanced theory and pedagogy in urban education (Borrero, 2011; Nuby, 2010).

Hammerness (2006) described the two central struggles related to teacher vision as being a balance between “constantly shifting demands of subject matter and the student’s needs; and dealing with the uneasy tension between their ideal and their current practice” (p. 5). Visions help teachers form what is possible, desirable, and inspired while connecting important values with classroom practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Perhaps this imbalance is the most stark and obvious while learning how to teach while teaching. The student teaching experience is often the first opportunity preservice teachers are able to put into practice with the knowledge and skills they learn during their preparation programs. Even the most conscientious preservice teacher may be faced with cognitive dissonance when theory and practice do not match. Pre-service teachers often complete student teaching in locations that do not reflect the schooling experience they had as children and often form their vision from an image of how they were schooled. Vision, as described by Maxine Greene (1988), is the “consciousness of possibility.” For students placed in vulnerable areas, teachers need to bring the conscience of what is possible to the classroom and make it accessible for their students.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to contribute to general knowledge, enhance understanding, and offer heuristic insight (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) on how urban student teaching experiences have an impact on preservice teacher vision. In this case, the lived experiences of preservice teachers placed in urban clinic settings were studied by using material culture. Rossman and Rallis (2003) refer to the use of material culture as relatively “unobtrusive and potentially rich in portraying the values and beliefs in a setting or social domain” (p. 198).

## **Participants**

The 15 preservice teachers who participated in the study represented all content areas and grade levels. The participants were placed in urban partner schools and were

second-semester seniors enrolled in the five-year IB/M program majoring in education. The student teaching placement took place in the students' fourth semester, resulting in the first full-time teaching experience. Participants were recruited for the study based on their enrollment in a three-credit seminar course in which the researchers were also the instructors. The students completed the journal prompts as reflective assignments for the course and gave consent to participate in the study at the completion of the course. Grades for the course were assigned before permission was requested for participation in the study.

### **Procedure**

Journal prompts were asked iteratively at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. The January prompts asked students to describe their vision of teaching and how or if they anticipate their vision being executed in an urban school. The midterm reflection prompt asked how their vision and an ideal classroom had changed. The final prompt asked students to describe their vision of teaching, an ideal classroom, and how it has been affected by being in an urban school student teaching placement.

Analysis of material culture may be the most interpretive analytic act in qualitative research because no protocols or specific guidelines for such analysis are available (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Data was reviewed several times over several months using categorical analysis to allow for patterns to emerge. Similarities and differences across the whole group were considered. Changes in individuals and their particular experience were also considered.

### **Findings**

In analyzing the data, five categories emerged that described what student teachers experienced while trying to implement their vision of teaching in an urban placement. The first category resulted in no mention or acknowledgment of the urban context in any of the three journal prompts. Only one person did not address the variable of the urban experience. The second category illustrated new realizations in how preservice teachers defined the role of teacher. The third category demonstrated cognitive dissonance in the difference between their ideal vision as it intersected with the reality of what they were experiencing. This category also included either the accommodation of the new information for professional growth *or* led to the fourth category, which was the establishment or reinforcement of negative perceptions. The last category that emerged was an appreciation, acceptance, and openness to the urban context the students had before, during, and after the experience.

### **Discussion**

The following discussion expands upon categories that emerged from the journals. The student who did not mention the urban context will not be included and is considered an outlier. Specific recommendations were added under each category due to their applicability to the findings, although all students could benefit from integrating the suggestions into planning or programming for teacher preparation students.

### **New Realizations in How They Defined the Role of a Teacher**

The urban experience provided an opportunity for three students to reshape their vision by expanding their definition of the role of teacher. All three mentioned a shift from what they perceived to be the focus of teaching, which was to deliver content to more of a social emotional role. One student stated, “As a teacher, I began realizing that the actual profession doesn’t revolve around teaching, but mentor, parent, advocate, friend, confidant” (Personal communication, April 25, 2011). Another student commented on how content became secondary in an urban environment:

In an urban environment, content is not the main focus of teaching. There are so many other aspects and barriers I had to overcome before really focusing on content. I ended up putting much of my time and effort into building strong relationships with all of my students and getting to know them on a personal level. (Personal communication, April 25, 2011)

If teacher educators spend time preparing students for some of the unique challenges before they begin their placements, even if it means delaying a clinical experience, it may diminish the learning curve for the students. Focusing on relevant and practical topics such as culturally responsive pedagogy and knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds (Safford & Bales, 2011), is essential to the long and short-term success of the student or new teacher.

### **Cognitive Dissonance in Ideal Versus Reality**

More than half of the students in the study noted a shift in the way they perceived the urban environment as having an impact on their ability to execute their vision of teaching. In particular, the obstacles teachers face and the resources they felt students and teachers should have had an impact on their visions, but did not necessarily change a vision itself. This is demonstrated when a student reflects that being in an urban student teaching setting has “presented many obstacles such as a lack of resources, large class sizes, piles of paperwork and discipline issues. As a teacher, my vision has remained the same, but how to reach that vision has changed” (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). It seems as though this student has accommodated for the new information and remains committed to look for pathways in continuing to work towards her version of an ideal classroom.

Other students seem to be somewhere on the trajectory of trying to make sense of available or unavailable resources. When mentioning basic resources, one student felt “even simple things such as a classroom with pipes that don’t leak, or with running water and sinks, or with computer access become evident to me now as important in my classroom” (Personal communication, February, 7, 2011). While another student focused more on the professional and collegial resources by stating, “Having an urban placement for student teaching has strengthened my views of how important teamwork, student centered learning, and necessary resources are for a successful classroom” (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). This same student identified that her vision may be difficult to accomplish in an urban environment, but had more specific examples by the end of the semester on what she would need to consider when working in urban contexts.

A suggestion for teacher educators would be to focus on the concept of flexible vision (Hammerness, 2006) as essential to resilience, retention, hope and optimism. Any course the student teacher takes alongside the clinical experience should manage and buffer them against adversity as well as build upon knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for success in working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Coursework should intentionally focus on how to maintain high expectations for themselves and their students when resources are scarce.

### **Establishment or Reinforcement of Negative Perceptions**

Several students who had a vision of teaching met by challenging conditions seemed to be grappling with lack of information. One student stated his confusion and uncertainty:

I'm not sure what this urban/suburban divide is that is constantly referenced. If it refers to the socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic challenges associated with an urban community. I'm not really sure what to anticipate in an urban education experience without resorting to stereotypes that I think do more harm than good leading into an experience. (Personal communication, February, 7, 2011)

It is a concern that preservice teachers might resort to stereotypes as their data source when they lack information or education on unique environments or conditions. Another student reflected on his vision in relationship to the setting and concluded, "My original vision seemed very reasonable and practical, until I realized it was only reasonable in an ideal setting. An ideal setting would include students that cared about success and saw value in their education" (Personal communication, April, 25, 2011). The preservice teacher is clearly operating from a deficit model of students in urban communities. A third student commented that

(T)eachers do not know many of the students, students do not know many of the teachers, and nobody seems to be going the extra mile to fix this. Security is a constant presence. There is a very poor sense of community. Frankly, it feels like a prison. (Personal communication, February 7, 2011)

These detrimental perceptions of urban schools are hindrances to success and need to be addressed directly and with transparency during teacher preparation whenever possible.

It may enhance a student's experience if opportunities are constructed for students to engage and interact with the local school community in a positive way prior to the placement. Student teachers often drive in and out of the city without understanding the culture and community in a way that could help them connect with students and the local context. Activities such as culture walks, scavenger hunts, home visits, and community speaker panels are ideas for this type of engagement. The new information and experiences garnered from understanding the community will help shape a more informed vision.

Visions can be culturally biased or exclusionary (Hammerness, 2006). It is important to ensure students have time in urban settings that model best practices and provide access to high-achieving students for at least part of the time. This will increase

the likelihood that preservice teachers will be able to visualize their visions in urban schools. It is important that students are provided with a counter narrative to how the media has influenced them or what they may have experienced in former clinic placements.

### **Complete Appreciation, Acceptance and Openness to the Urban Context**

Two students demonstrated a strong desire to be in urban environments, anticipated challenges, and had strategized how to solve problems and stay optimistic. All iterations of their visions relayed a positive portrait of city schools, student potential and the impact they could have in those environments. It would be a worthwhile focus of inquiry to parse out the experiences, influences and dispositions of preservice teachers who may exhibit the concepts of a flexible vision or resilient spirit before they start or finish a teacher preparation program.

### **Conclusion**

The United States needs well-prepared teachers for urban schools. Teacher preparation programs need to deliberately focus on how to support new teachers in urban settings in order to create equitable, empowering, humanizing learning contexts (Borrero, 2001; Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; James-Wilson, 2007; Nieto, 2005). Pre-service teacher vision may be at its most formative and vulnerable state during their preparation program and can have a powerful impact on what they think is possible for themselves and their students. Constructing opportunities that assist preservice teachers in creating a flexible, yet informed vision is essential for creating the next generation of resilient teachers.

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## REDISCOVERING GOOD TEACHING: EXPLORING SELFHOOD AND SOLIDARITY IN URBAN CONTEXTS

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### Abstract

This paper describes the experiences of preservice teachers developing deeper understanding of themselves and diverse students through participation in the Philadelphia Urban Seminar. The Seminar focuses on the reconstruction of more complete understanding of urban students and urban communities by combining field experience in Philadelphia with profession development, service projects and contact with community members and organizations. Field notes, transcriptions of interviews and meetings, as well as reflective writing are analyzed using the framework of Solidarity (Rorty, 1998). Findings suggest that specific models of field experience and reflection are necessary to adequately prepare beginning teachers to work in urban classrooms.

**Keywords:** Preservice teachers, urban communities, Selfhood and Solidarity

This paper began in early 2002 when new federal educational policy suggested, and eventually demanded, a particular definition of a good teacher. This policy, which began as *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and is now known as *Race to the Top* (Department of Education, 2009), employs a conception of good teaching that involves standardizing both the content good teachers were expected to know and the methods good teachers were expected to use to communicate this content. As a result of this policy, school districts and individual schools have adopted regulatory practices that enforce particular pedagogical models across all grade levels and narrow curriculum to focus on preparation for high stakes tests (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hill, 2007; Cawelti, 2006). Within the policies, there's no clear definition of what counts as a "qualified teacher," an "effective teacher," or a "good teacher" for any school, let alone an urban school, beyond passage of standardized content tests. This paper will not propose a definition of a good teacher either, but instead will try to extend the conception of good teaching to include a number of qualities that seem absent from any conception of qualified, effective, or good teaching available in the literature.

In a charitable sense, *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* have shed important light on the lack of educational opportunities in urban schools. However, the mandated teaching practices and narrowed curriculum have had a disproportional effect

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on the educational experiences in urban schools, and have resulted in some of the questionable teaching practices and administrative policies described so vividly in Jonathan Kozol's *Shame of the Nation* (2005) and illustrated in documentaries such as *Hard Times at Douglass High: A No Child Left Behind Report Card* (2008) Further, mandated pedagogies and narrowed content do not seem to be a pathway toward better teaching in urban classrooms, as any improvements in learning or teaching practices gained in the years since 2002 are suspicious (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2009; Meier & Wood, 2004).

This lack of progress begs the question, "What is an effective pathway to good teaching, and good teaching in urban schools in particular?" Existing research (see Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005; Cochrane-Smith and Zeichner, 2005 for many examples) has generated many frameworks and lists of the qualities of good teachers and the practices good teachers employ. However, although these lists of qualities and practices may describe good teaching in a general sense, they do not explain why teachers who possess them do not necessarily become effective teachers.

This paper will propose two potential solutions to this problem. First, one reason that descriptions of effective teaching in general fall short is that they fail to incorporate *teacher selfhood* (Palmer, 1998) in the conceptions. This failure results in teacher certification programs, school administrators, and teachers themselves overemphasizing the wrong things, such as content and teaching methods, in the preparation for and supervision of classroom practice. Secondly, a possible reason that teachers with all the requisite skills fail to teach effectively in urban schools is their inability to achieve a sense of *solidarity* (Rorty, 1989) with their students. Instead of enabling teachers to know their students in deep and meaningful ways, teachers are taught surface tricks and techniques to know students which maintain the separation between teacher and student, disabling real communication and connection. Using the Philadelphia Urban Seminar as the context, this paper will illustrate how 17 beginning teachers came to understand how they could become good teachers through the exploration and rediscovery of selfhood and solidarity.

### **Conceptual Framework: Selfhood and Solidarity**

In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer proposes a rich, yet seemingly simple, way to connect the qualities of good teaching to the practice of good teachers. He asserts that knowledge and skills alone do not make teachers effective. What does is the way knowledge and skills are put to use in relation to each teacher's personal identity *as a teacher*. As he writes, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." (p. 10). This identity and integrity, what Palmer calls *teacher selfhood*, goes beyond classroom management skills, knowledge of child development, and sensitivity to diverse students. Teacher selfhood is a deeper commitment to deconstruct and reconstruct initial images of how teachers work in classrooms to can escape the orthodoxy of standardized methods of instruction, scripted curriculum, and rigid adherence to external mandates that can inhibit their development, particularly in urban schools. As Palmer writes, "as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes." (p. 24).

The philosophical framework of solidarity (Rorty, 1989) puts this personhood to work. Rorty writes that solidarity “is not about clearing away prejudice or burrowing into repressed anger or fear, but rather as a goal to be achieved through imagination—the ability to see unfamiliar people as fellow travelers –it is not only discovered through reflection, but is created by increasing our sensitivity to their circumstances...” (1989, xvi). The concept of solidarity provides a framework for understanding students where the distinctions between “us” (the teachers) and “them” (the students) become less clearly defined. This move toward solidarity is particularly important in urban schools and with urban students, as the myriad of bias, stereotype, and real obstacles to successful educational experiences often conflict with the well-intentioned efforts of teachers striving to become effective in urban settings (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007).

### **The Philadelphia Urban Seminar**

The Philadelphia Urban Seminar (the Seminar) is a two-week residential course focused on urban teaching in Philadelphia. The Seminar combines 10 full days of field experience in Philadelphia public schools, professional development meetings, daily seminar meetings focused on processing the experiences in urban schools, and service projects in the neighborhoods surrounding the placement schools.

### **Subjects**

This project focuses on 17 teacher certification students, all of whom, self-selected to participate in the Seminar in 2008. They were all traditional undergraduate students in the teacher certification program at a university in Pennsylvania. All subjects were white, and all came from suburban or rural communities. Although they all had one field experience in urban schools, none of them had any consistent contact with the kinds of schools or students they would encounter in Philadelphia before the Seminar began.

### **Data**

Data for this paper are taken from a larger longitudinal project describing the development of this group of teacher candidates through their certification programs and into their first years of teaching. This paper focuses on transcriptions of three Seminar meetings, although the analytical framework includes transcriptions of all ten Seminar meetings as well as interviews, reflective coursework, and field notes from classroom observations. Data were continually analyzed using the constant comparative method pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Seminar meetings centered on equipping students to unpack their daily experiences in urban classrooms through reflective discussion. The meetings juxtaposed field experiences with structured reflection as explicitly as possible, and often involved community members, experienced urban teachers, and urban students in the conversations. During the first Seminar meeting, directly after their first day in classrooms, a lengthy discussion occurred surrounding the physical space of the schools.

Most teacher candidates, although they had read books about inner-city schools and done a previous field experience in urban settings, were generally shocked by their first encounter with Philadelphia schools. Three teacher candidates began the discussion with these comments:

**Tara:** I was really shocked that there were 29 students and only one teacher occupying a space that might fit 15 kids comfortably. That really threw all my thoughts about teacher to student ratio and optimized learning environments out the window in about 15 seconds. There are just too many kids with really extreme level differences. If the room was a little bigger there may have been the possibility of working in small groups, but there just wasn't room—to really make the learning effective and organized.

**Heather:** Yeah, there are 32 kids in my room, and you can't even walk around the room without bumping into desks, and some kids don't even have desks. They sit on the windowsills with low tables piled with the teacher's stuff. It's really hard to imagine how anyone could learn in there.

**Kristen:** I think the thing that affected me the most was the whole respect for space thing. When I went down to the cafeteria my teacher pointed out this black shriveled-up thing in the rafters, it looked sort of like a tennis ball, and it turned out that it was an orange somebody threw up there three years ago, and I was thinking, "You have got to be kidding me." If we are setting this example that the school doesn't need to be respected, then that send the message that education doesn't need to be respected either. There were classrooms that looked like they came straight out of *The Wire*, that show on HBO? I thought that was TV, but apparently not. Like how can people function in trash and mess? Like dirty? (Personal communication, May 12, 2008).

These teacher candidates represented the dispositions of all subjects in beginning the experience thinking of the space of the classroom in the same way they thought of themselves - through a lens of normativity. They compared what a "normal" school or classroom should look like, based on whatever ideas they had about what a classroom should be, and ascribed "less than" qualities to these classrooms that didn't look "normal" or work normally.

This represented a real difficulty in encouraging beginning teachers to develop a complete sense of teacher selfhood. Liston & Zeichner (1996) write that since many beginning teachers come from homogenous communities, in essence they are "prisoners of their own experience," as they have had little contact with people and children of different background from their own. So, though these prospective teachers began the Seminar with a positive outlook, their lack of experience with diverse students prevented them from seeing the school and the children clearly, with compassion and understanding (p. 68).

A central focus of the Seminar is interrupting the "missionary mindset" (Mahoney, 2008), the idea that good teachers need to *save* the students and that the students *needed saving* from their circumstances. By seeing the positive dimensions of urban neighborhoods, though structured reflection and conversations, service projects,

and contact with community leaders, all 17 of the student teachers began to see the hope and promise their students lived within, as well as the poverty and despair. As their eyes opened to the positive dimensions of urban communities, they realized that urban students needed great teachers that recognized the valuable resources that surrounded the schools, not people to rescue them from these resources. The shift from saving students to teaching students represented a major milestone on their path to finding their selfhood in the Seminar, and a first step on their path toward a fuller sense of solidarity with their students. This shift is also deemed essential for effective urban teachers (Stairs, Donnell & Dunn, 2012; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007) and one that is entirely neglected in many teacher certification programs, in professional induction programs for new teachers, and in professional development for practicing teachers.

At the start of a Seminar meeting at the end of the first week, this interaction took place:

**Ellen:** I can't stop thinking about what I saw on the way to school this morning: A mother in a nightdress and slippers sending her kids to school from the porch. The kids were really cute in their uniforms and backpacks and they seemed to have so much energy, but what struck me is that I would have seen a completely different scene two days ago. I would have seen a beat-up house in a beat up neighborhood and an overweight woman in pajamas who can't walk her own kids to school through a really scary neighborhood because she can barely get out of bed. Today, I saw a family trying to start their day.

**Karey:** You know, I don't think I ever realized how uncomfortable I felt being so surrounded by students, only students of color. You know, because I am. Today, at about noon, boy, it hit me, and I don't even know what happened, but things clicked, and maybe what happened is that I stopped looking at color and started looking at what we have in common. Then, I started talking to them the way they talked to me, like I started saying, "y'all are nasty." and stuff like that. I know. Its ridiculous, and I don't even know that I have been saying that, you know, but this morning the kids were sniffing their armpits. They are in sixth grade. And I was like, "What are you doing?" and they were like, "Well, we are just sniffing our armpits." And I said "y'all are nasty!" and I walked away. And I was like, "I just said 'y'all are nasty!' What am I doing?" (Personal communication, May 16, 2008)

As they started to question the normalization of communities, schools, and students and reject the missionary mindset, these teacher candidates began to articulate how they were growing to understanding urban students in the short duration of the Seminar. After nine days in school, this interaction took place during a Seminar meeting in response to a question about how teachers can truly know their students:

**Susan:** I totally agree, I think our relationships with the kids are the first thing we want to think about, but I was thinking about how hard I found that to be here. How much I had to work on finding ways to relate.

**Amanda:** OK, so Susan, I mean our question really is how can we relate to these kids, that we are dealing with here, but really anywhere, and I am not sure that there is an answer, because we don't know, and we can't know, what these kids are going through, because we are not them. What we can do is show them that, yes, we do not understand what they are going through, but that doesn't take away from our ability to sit and listen to them. And it's hard to talk about, but just giving them the option to come to you as someone they can confide in, that goes a long way. And maybe we can't relate to the bigger things they have going on, but some of the smaller things, that's maybe a place we can reach them, find commonalities.

**Michelle:** Yeah. I'm obviously not black. I'm not in sixth in Grade. I'm not in foster care. I don't live in inner city Philadelphia. But I think where we find common ground is that every day for the past two weeks I have been looking into the eyes of someone who I don't know how he is going to react, and I think he is looking at me the same way. That is where the common ground is, in saying that I don't know if I can trust this person, I don't know who this person is, but I am going to risk it, and I think that is enough of a commonality to build off us, to begin trusting each other.

**Valerie:** This morning two boys were arguing over who had darker skin. I decided to ask them to compare my arm to theirs, and I could see them working through the idea of who cared about lighter or darker. I think I really made them think about the color issue because they never talked about it the rest of the day. I just think that since we talked so freely about race with each other, I felt liberated to talk about it with my kids, and because I was so open, it worked. I felt like I had a major victory for myself and those boys. (Personal communication, May 22, 2008).

The movement these students show toward understanding their students is stronger than empathy or sensitivity, as there is still a demarcation between self and other in those dispositions. Taking solidarity seriously as a way to understand students goes deeper. Rorty writes that our sense of solidarity is strongest when we think of those with whom solidarity is expressed as one of us, where *us* is defined as something smaller and more local than "the human race." In this way, the teacher candidates' desire to work with city kids was deepened to go beyond some vague obligation to work with less fortunate kids, or altruistic notions of helping kids who did not have the same advantages they had. Those ideas persist in placing the person at the center and the other at the margin. Through the reflection of the Seminar, notions of altruism and the conception that "we" are there to save "them" began to disappear as their sense of teacher selfhood expanded. Henry (1966) called the intellectual work required to imagine teaching in such a way "the assertion of self" and identified such work as a key component in developing alternative practices in an environment that emphasizes standardization over creativity and innovation. This is not to suggest that teachers should focus exclusively on self-knowledge if they want to become good teachers in urban schools, but the assertion of self may be the essential component that binds all the other characteristics of good

teaching together. Without this binding, there is no structure to hold all the qualities of good teachers together and integrate them into more than a checklist or a list of attributes. They only can only become qualities teachers practice through the assertion of self.

### Conclusion

Despite the possibility of illuminating the nexus of teacher and students through a concept like solidarity, Margolis (2007) rightly cautions teachers to reject the idealism that they can somehow dismiss existing relations of power and privilege and find some commonalities with their students as equals. For these students to “understand” life in poverty, growing up in urban neighborhoods, or childhood for a person of color is ridiculous.

However, Rorty (1989) writes that one way to come to terms with what he calls the “slogan” that might define the work of good teachers, that people should try to help other people succeed, is to expand as far as possible our sense of “us”—to actively seek common ground with others. While this is not something that only teachers should do, it is a movement that is essential for good teaching. This is because if the call for good and effective teaching—in many ways the slogan “No Child Left Behind” is one of them, can be understood and acted upon, then thinking about our students through solidarity provides a new vocabulary for reweaving notions of good teaching to accommodate the new discoveries of commonality, equality and worth.

That might be the most critical part of this project, and what most definitions of good teaching neglect. A teacher, school administrator, or policy maker can not simply decide to leave no child behind any more than a teacher can say “I am a good teacher” and thus become one. Teaching in a way that every student can learn is an idea that has to be created through the interaction and understanding of the teacher and the students. It cannot be forced upon teachers and students in the hope that they will eventually come to accept it. Until policy makers, administrators and teachers realize that leaving no child behind or winning the race to the top involves recognizing that the students can succeed before we implement policies that will require them to succeed, there is little hope for large scale improvement of urban schools.

Further, until teacher candidates are allowed to explore their selfhood and engage in field experiences that involve an explicit focus on building solidarity through recognizing the positive resources surrounding diverse schools, it seems likely that the missionary mentality will persist in the way they frame teaching in urban schools, and there is even less hope that they will be prepared to be great teachers in urban schools through their certification programs.

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## **BRUCE RANDOLPH HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN SCHOOL BECOMING SUCCESSFUL FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS**

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### **Abstract**

Working in a research collaborative between Denver Public Schools and the University of Colorado Denver, the authors selected Bruce Randolph High School (BRHS) as a case study because of its growth on state academic achievement tests and because of its multilingual learners. After a difficult beginning, BRHS has established an inclusive culture of expectation for learning and community participation, a reciprocal instructional culture emphasizing instructional coaching and continuous improvement, a strong emphasis on language development and literacy across the curriculum, and interventions to prevent course failure. These characteristics, facilitated by the school's Innovation Status in the district, are central to its emerging success.

**Keywords:** Multilingual Learners, Urban Education, Teacher-Researcher Collaboration, Academic Achievement

### **Conceptual Framework**

Empirical and conceptual scholarship regarding the education of the large and growing population of multilingual learners<sup>8</sup> in urban schools in the United States paints

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<sup>8</sup>We use the term "multilingual learners" to refer to those students whose daily lived reality involves the use and navigation of multiple languages. While the literature and schools generally refer to this population as "English



a picture of systemic failure. Urban schools often segregate and marginalize multilingual learners (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valdés, 1998). Policies create hostile environments for teachers (Arellano-Houchin, Flamenco, Merlos, & Segura, 2001), multilingual learners may be overlooked and prematurely pushed into mainstream courses with unprepared teachers (Harper & de Jong, 2009), and high stakes tests create stress and narrow curriculum (Wiley & Wright, 2004). In addition, many teachers have negative attitudes about teaching multilingual learners (Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004) and are unprepared to support their academic development (Li & Zhang, 2004). Some programs and policies have proved successful and supportive (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009), but these are isolated instances of accomplishment in the face of prominent systemic barriers.

The problems surrounding multilingual learners are particularly acute at the high school level. The on-time graduation rate for Latino high school students in the United States is just over 53 percent, as opposed to 75 percent for students of European descent (Swanson, 2004). Compared to students of European descent, Latino students are more likely to attend very large high schools with high concentrations of students from low income families and with higher ratios of students to teachers, all of which are characteristics of schools associated with lower achievement and lower graduation rates (Balfanz, 2009). In light of these circumstances, analyses of high schools in which Latino students from low-income families are succeeding are of particular interest.

A large body of research on school effectiveness, most of it involving elementary schools serving students from low-income homes, has identified several characteristics of urban schools generally associated with improved academic achievement. The seven correlates most frequently listed are: (a) high expectations for success, (b) strong instructional leadership, (c) a clear and focused mission, (d) opportunity to learn/time on task, (e) frequent monitoring of student progress, (f) a safe and orderly environment, and (g) positive home-school relations (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Recent studies focusing specifically on successful schools for Latino students and multilingual learners have generally found that such schools exhibited these general characteristics, but also have additional characteristics supportive of language learners. These additional characteristics include: a language lens in the form of awareness and support for language learners through sheltered instruction: attention to academic language and language objectives across the curriculum (Nocon, Davis, Keenan, Brancard, Dray, Johnson, Mitchell, Nathenson-Mejia, Shanklin, Shannon, Poulsen, Tomas-Ruzic, Tzur & Verma, 2011); strong and positive relationships between students and teachers (Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; School Redesign Network, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, C., Pimentel, A., & Martin, M., 2009); strong collaborative systems to support ongoing professional development (School Redesign Network, 2007; Nocon, et al., 2011); and a coherent organizational culture (Jesse et al., 2004; Nocon et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to describe one increasingly successful urban high school for Latino multilingual learners, BRHS, in Denver. The school, located in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in North Denver, was selected for study because it has demonstrated the highest rate of growth on state tests of academic achievement and English language proficiency among neighborhood (non-magnet) high schools for

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Language Learners” (ELL) or “Limited English Proficient,” (LEP) we choose to use the aforementioned term to refer to multilingual learners at all levels of English proficiency in an effort to shift the focus on this population from English deficiency to an asset based perspective centered on multilingual abilities.

multilingual learners students in the city. During the 2009-10 school year, the school was made up of 95 percent Latino students, 84 percent of whom reported speaking Spanish at home. More than 95 percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Although scores on state and national tests were not high, with 43 percent of students proficient or above in reading, and 13% proficient or above in math (Colorado Department of Education, 2010a), multilingual students demonstrated very high rates of growth in Reading, Writing, Math, and English language proficiency. Colorado's growth model uses growth percentiles with a statewide median of 50 for each subject and grade to measure annual student growth (Betebenner, 2007). For BRHS, three-year averaged state-wide growth percentiles were 67 in reading, 69 in writing, and 60 in math, equivalent to annual effect sizes of .63, .70, and .26, respectively (Nocon et al., 2011). Students made an average three-year overall effect size gain of .31 above the state mean in English language proficiency, measured by the Colorado English Language Assessment (CELA) (Nocon et al., 2011). The graduation rate for Latino students at BRHS was 85.3 percent in 2010, compared to a statewide average of 55.5 percent (Colorado Department of Education, 2010b). As the case study neared completion, the school received national attention when President Obama mentioned it in his State of the Union Address in January, 2011, as an example of a school that had rapidly improved from being one of the worst schools in the state to one in which 97 percent of its seniors graduated (Obama, 2011); but this was praise that was challenged by Diane Ravitch because most students did not test at proficient levels on state tests (Ravitch, 2011).

### **Method**

Three types of data were collected in the development of the Bruce Randolph High School case study. First, a series of guided semi-structured interviews were held with teachers and administrators of the school. The initial interview, which included the principal and four teachers, focused on the salient school-wide practices and characteristics of the school that the participants believed were most associated with the high rates of academic and language growth of its students. Three subsequent focus group interviews with teachers and administrators explored these nominated practices in greater depth. Second, a systematic visual environmental scan was conducted by photographing the hallways and every wall of multiple classrooms. These were analyzed to observe language and content learning resources, to identify prevalent symbols and messages, and to provide triangulation for assertions from interviews regarding school-wide practices (e.g., visuals present in every classroom, evidence of progress monitoring in each classroom, and evidence that students were encouraged to aspire for college).

The third type of data was a wide range of documents and online representations, including mission statements, master schedules, professional development schedules, handbooks, general messages to parents, and unified improvement plans. These data were used to examine the school's representation of itself and its practices as well as to analyze patterns of communication. The school's website was analyzed for ease of use, available resources, and use of multiple languages. These data were also triangulated with assertions from interviews. Finally, members of the research team conducted informal observations, spending time in the school, attending an assembly, and talking with school leaders and teachers as informal confirmation of consistency between verbal

descriptions and enacted practice. Table 1 provides a summary of data sources, dates, examples of the questions asked, and data collected.

Data analysis occurred in three phases. In the first phase researchers conducted a content analysis of the initial interviews, documents, observation protocols, and the photographic inventory. A number of a priori codes were identified by the collaborative research team (e.g., language and content objectives, and visual explanation), and emergent codes were inferred from the data using the constant comparative method. Data were first coded by two independent investigators and were then checked by a third investigator for inter-rater reliability. The research team then reviewed and refined the final analyses and produced a draft case report.

In the second phase, the draft report was shared with school leadership followed by a member-check interview. The interviewer began with a brief synopsis of the school's case and major findings, and then asked: (a) What elements of our case report of your school's practices do you find to be accurate, inaccurate, or too simplistic? and (b) To what do you attribute the success of learners of English as a second language at your school? Based on this member check interview, two additional interviews were conducted to refine case study findings, and the report was then revised. All research team members, several district administrators, and the school leadership reviewed the final case study report in order to ensure its accuracy and clarity. The principal gave explicit permission for quoted information to be attributed to him by name; quoted information from teachers and coaches are attributed as personal communication by referencing their professional positions.

## **Results**

BRHS opened as a new school in 2002. Its first two years were marked with disciplinary incidents, declining test scores, and turmoil, all resulting in the school being designated Unsatisfactory by the state for three consecutive years. Dr. Kristin Waters, an experienced principal of European descent who had led a successful change effort at Morey Middle School in the same district (Denver Public Schools, 2009), was invited to become principal at BRHS and to lead a re-design of the school in the fall of 2005. All staff had to resign and re-apply for their positions, and the school was "built out" starting with grades seven and eight, adding lower and higher grades each year with the goal of serving grades six through twelve. A document drafted that year, Challenge 2010 (recognizing that the first graduating class would be the class of 2010), stated that the school would become one "where college students or DPS staff come to see high quality education executed effectively and skillfully" and where 100% of students would graduate (Waters, 2005, p. 1). Waters initially concentrated on establishing safety and order and eliciting support from parents, and then turned her full attention to inspiring collective efficacy, building a shared vision, and striving for a consistency of approach. Innovation Status from the district gave the school more autonomy with respect to its schedule and work hours, budget, curriculum, and hiring.

In 2009, Waters left BRHS to lead a district-wide school reform initiative. Cesar Cedillo, who had served as Assistant Principal since 2005 under Waters' leadership, became the new principal. Cedillo refers to Waters as his mentor, and believes that he shares a similar vision of high expectations for the school. Like many of the students in

Date	Data Component	Participants	Data Type	Data Source
January 2008, 2009, 2010	CELA	Students grades k-12	Assessment of English proficiency	Accountability, Research and Evaluation (ARE) Department
March 2008, 2009, 2010	CSAP	Students grades 3-10	Assessment of Reading, Math, Writing standards	ARE
September 2010	School Performance Framework	All DPS schools that contains at least one grade that takes CSAP	Schools are accredited using a number of factors related to school performance.	<a href="http://testing.dpsk12.org/public/spf/current/ISPF_summary_traditional.pdf">http://testing.dpsk12.org/public/spf/current/ISPF_summary_traditional.pdf</a>
12-10-10	Interview/Focus Group #1	Principal Humanities Coach Reading Intervention Coach	Interview questions e.g., What are the top three essentials explaining your school success?	Transcription
1-07-11	Environmental Scan	E.g., Entryway, Walls, Cognate word walls	Photograph and observation protocol e.g., Take notes about languages and cultural and ethnic groups which are included on signs, posters, etc.	Photographs, environmental observation protocol
December 2010 – January 2011	School Documents	E.g., Challenge 2010 Document, Coaching Cycle, BR Website, Referral Ladder	Document analysis e.g., analysis of root causes of priority needs areas identified in Unified Improvement Plan	Data were received from school and district officials; UIPs: <a href="http://www.cde.state.co.us/uiip/">http://www.cde.state.co.us/uiip/</a>
2-08-11	Interview/Focus Group #2	Principal Parent Liaison Heritage Spanish	Interview questions e.g., What elements of our case initial do you find to be accurate, inaccurate, or too simplistic?	Transcription
2-24-11	Interview/Focus Group #3	Special Education Special Education 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade Science 10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Math	Interview questions e.g., What is the approach in this school to helping teachers continue to grow professionally?	Transcription of interview
2-25-11	Interview/Focus Group #4	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts 11 <sup>th</sup> & 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Lang. Arts 10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade Science	Interview questions e.g., What does teacher collaboration look like at your school?	Transcription of interview

the school, Cedillo was born in Mexico, came to Denver at age eight, is multilingual, and grew up attending public schools in Denver not far from the Bruce Randolph neighborhood.

### **BRHS Today: A Culture of Learning**

For several years, the leadership and community at BRHS have worked to create a culture of learning in which students embrace the value of learning and post-secondary education and feel confident they can succeed. Teachers and administrators identified three important elements contributing to the culture of learning emerging in the school: high expectations, a safe and orderly environment, and strong parent involvement.

**High expectations.** The Challenge 2010 document described forth a vision for BRHS when re-design began in 2005 and set a goal of 100% graduation. In our initial interview session Principal Cedillo (Personal communication, December 10, 2010) said, “The vision now, which I think nearly every teacher can recite, is to graduate 100% of kids prepared to succeed in a four-year college or university without remediation. That’s our mission.” This message is reflected in the college banners on the walls of the school, and signs in classrooms identifying the teachers’ alma maters.

The emphasis on high expectations is linked to teacher efficacy. “There’s a culture here among the staff that you need to believe in our kids,” said the Humanities Facilitator (Personal communication, December 10, 2010). “You feel awkward if you don’t believe in our kids.” In response to the question, “What does the school do to bring students on board as seeing themselves as successful learners?” the principal responded, “First and foremost, there is an expectation that you will learn at this school.” (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). In subsequent interviews, teachers confirmed the theme of positive expectations, and agreed that most students internalized these expectations.

**A safe and orderly environment.** When the re-design of BRHS began in 2005, creating a safe and orderly environment was the first priority. All of our interviews and informal observations in the school confirmed that a safe and orderly environment was now established, but never taken for granted. It was maintained in part through the consistent implementation of a seven-step process across all classrooms in the school. One of the special education teachers noted:

To me one of the biggest things that we do well here is our behavior and our discipline structure. I mean you walk down the halls and for the most part they are very quiet. All of the classrooms are pretty well behaved so, I think it’s the on-task time. (Special Education teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Another teacher who was new to BRHS in 2011 stated, “One of the reasons I came to this school was the ... referral policy. Kids want to be here, they know what is expected.” (Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

**Strong parent involvement.** The school funds a full-time parent and community liaison who works closely with parents to support their input into school processes. Parent meetings are held once or twice each month, with simultaneous dual-language translation, chaired by parents on a rotating basis. The parent and community liaison explained:

Whichever language is the native language of that parent who is leading that part of the agenda, that part of the agenda is led in that language. You are going back and forth between English and Spanish, which means that everybody has headsets, not just Spanish speakers. (Parent and Community Liaison, Personal communication, February 8, 2011).

The principal shares in the cultural and linguistic background of most of the families, and contributes to creating a responsive environment for parents.

Parents of students also have access to BRHS for health, wellness and learning. There is a community health clinic in the building and parents come to the school for the workout room and exercise classes, and many attend English classes for non-native speakers. These efforts have broken down some of the barriers that traditionally prevent parents from varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds from effectively engaging in schooling processes (Mitchell, 2010). Parents at BRHS are an explicit part of the culture of learning, and receive weekly academic progress reports about their child that they are asked to sign and return.

**Positive teacher-student relations.** Several educators commented on the positive relationships between students and teachers, and the importance of those relationships for learning. Principal Cedillo said that believing in students and being able to relate positively to them is essential in a teacher. In turn, he said, “We found that once our students have a positive relationship with a teacher, they’ll go through a brick wall for them” (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). A math teacher commented, “I see all students really completely comfortable coming to teachers asking for help, and relying on teachers for things beyond academia. And that really gives them a feeling of comfortability [sic]” (Math Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

### **Academic Focus and a Language Lens**

When we asked teachers and coaches at BRHS about classroom supports for English language learners, they emphasized that because 83% of their students were English language learners, English language acquisition supports were woven into all aspects of instruction. Three aspects of instruction emerged as important to our understanding of the success of the school: extended literacy instruction, consistent and scaffolded instruction, and initiatives to prevent course failure.

**Extended literacy instruction.** Elective courses were reduced to extend the amount of time for literacy instruction. All students have a seventy-minute language arts. Extended independent reading takes place every day, and all language arts classes have classroom libraries with high interest chapter books grouped by reading level to assist students in finding books that are appropriate for their reading level. According to a

Literacy Coach, “Our high school teachers are sticklers about independent reading time every day. When you walk in there, all of those kids are reading” (Literacy Coach, Personal communication, December 10, 2010).

**Consistent and scaffolded instruction.** Over time, instruction at BRHS has come to involve core elements that are shared across most classrooms. Among these elements are direct instruction, supports for multilingual learners, and daily progress monitoring. The following exchange between a language arts (LA) teacher and a science teacher illustrates the common approach:

**LA Teacher:** Often times it’s direct instruction at first, and then practicing it all of us together, going through the steps, releasing it for them to do with their partners.

**Interviewer:** Is that pretty consistent across language arts, or do you think that is isolated to just your room?  
[Everyone agrees it is consistent across classrooms.]

**Science teacher:** It’s pretty much in everybody’s classroom, throughout the different subjects. Every classroom has a warm up. Every classroom has some direct instruction. Every classroom has some sort of way of assessing learning. (Focus Group #3, Feb. 25, 2011). (Language Arts Teacher and Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Instruction is scaffolded for all students in ways that have been found to be important for multilingual learners. Word walls, visual resources, and sheltered English are employed in content instruction. Each classroom is also equipped with a document camera, a projector, and a laptop so that teachers can refer to specific places in a text as well as use their laptop for PowerPoint presentations or web-based.

Students are encouraged to explain things to one another in Spanish during class to scaffold comprehension in English. For example, a language arts teacher explained, “There’s a whole lot of conversation that goes on where my language learners are allowed to speak in Spanish to figure out concepts and figure out what exactly they need to do. But they always need to present their mastery in English” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011). Teachers in the focus group confirmed this practice in other content areas.

**Initiatives to prevent course failure.** A key to the high graduation rate at BRHS is the diligent implementation of procedures to prevent course failure. Each week during grade level meetings teachers discuss students who are failing a course. These students are required to attend tutoring and show evidence with a staff signature and submission of any assignments. A language arts teacher explained, “We pour over the F lists and say, ‘Okay, this kid, what’s going on with this kid?’” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011). Teachers remind one another to congratulate students who improve failing grades. Seniors meet weekly with an assigned adult mentor. A science teacher explained how he communicates with the mentor of a struggling student:

I have one of those students in my class. He is a senior taking a junior class

because he failed it last year. So I emailed his mentor and said, “He’s got all this stuff he just needs to turn it in.” And she said she would be in his face every day. (Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

### **A Culture of Reciprocity and Continuous Improvement**

A sense of coherence has come about at BRHS, not because consistency is mandated from above, but because teachers, students, parents, staff, and administrators decide things together and because all are committed to learning from one another. A sense of functioning together as a team that works towards improving results now characterizes the school at several levels.

**Receptive leadership.** Principal Cedillo describes himself as a leader who thrives off of the input of others. He seeks stakeholder input on important decisions and has a leadership team comprised of a variety of community representatives that includes teachers, students, and adult family members. The approach was recently illustrated when discussing the problem of students having cell phones in class.

**Science Teacher:** A few months in, we had a cell phone issue, especially with our high schoolers. Cesar took it on and talked to everyone and asked for teacher feedback on the issue. And then we had several staff meetings to make sure we are all being consistent. And it seemed to help with the cell phone issue.

**Math Teacher:** Virtually wiped it out! Really. (Science Teacher and Math Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011)

Similarly, in the monthly meetings for parents, leadership proactively seeks input.

**Professional collegiality.** “We have great teachers,” Principal Cedillo told us in our first interview (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). Teachers are positioned as content experts and professional colleagues, and actively discuss instruction. When we asked how teachers had come to embrace a common approach to instruction, they described how they had arrived at it together:

**Interviewer:** Is that something that was put to you, that this is how we teach here? Or is this just something that you guys all decided?

**Science Teacher:** It was everyone’s input.

**LA Teacher:** We saw that it was a practical model. ... And so we collaborated and it’s just grown from there. (Science Teacher and Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

A science teacher reported, “All the teachers also we have a system of backing each other up. If there is a teacher that is struggling with something, there is another



teacher with an idea on how to approach something for a behavior issue” (Science Teacher, February 25, 2011).

Teachers frequently make use of the district’s data system, Infinite Campus, to post notes about individual students, which, in turn, are read by other teachers of that student, thus facilitating interventions. Several teachers commented on the importance of that method of sharing information about students.

**Coaching and continuous improvement.** All teachers at BRHS work regularly with an instructional coach for their content area, and new teachers have access to a behavior coach to help with classroom management. There are six instructional coaches: one for the language arts core (a humanities coach), one for reading intervention, and one each for math, science, special education, and fine arts. Coaches help teachers to recognize and reflect on their own strengths and to set goals to improve on areas of weakness (Humanities Coach, ,, December 12, 2010). Teachers feel substantially valued through this work and expressed appreciation for opportunities to grow without fear of being labeled “poor” or “ineffective.” A new science teacher explained:

I have taught at three other schools, where if you are having a problem, obviously there is “something wrong with you”. That is not the atmosphere here. I’m having a problem and someone says, “Let me help you figure out how to fix it.” (Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

Professional development (PD) and instructional decisions at BRHS are based on teacher led initiatives. Every month teachers have PD opportunities created by the instructional coaches who seek input from teachers and then create learning opportunities to meet teachers’ expressed needs. These locally developed PD opportunities appear to be exceptionally effective as well as the natural out-growth of a strong coaching and mentoring model.

In short, teachers told us that BRHS is a supportive community for educators, students, parents, and support staff. A language arts teacher expressed it this way:

**LA Teacher:** I know every day I go home and my husband says, “You just glow” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, December, 10, 2010)

**Interviewer:** And do you think that’s the tenor of all the faculty here? That they just love working here?

**LA Teacher:** I’d say 95%. And you just feel it in the halls, you feel the energy in the kids. I mean the other schools that I worked at it was, I didn’t go in the teacher lounge because it was nothing but a bashing session of students or other teachers. And you just don’t have that here.

### **Conclusion**

Through the creation of a culture of learning and high expectations, and reciprocity, as well a relentless commitment to continuous improvement, an integrated

emphasis on language development and literacy, and interventions to prevent course failure, has seen dramatic improvement in the educational outcomes of multilingual learners. While the school must continue to improve for all students to reach proficiency and be college ready, great strides have been made through the integrated whole school approach to educational improvement that all members of the BRHS community have had opportunity to engage in.

The school-wide practices at BRHS echo the familiar correlates of effective schools from more than thirty years of research (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). The school also enacts characteristics more specifically associated with effective schools serving multilingual learners such as scaffolded instruction, the use of home language, and positive teacher-student relationships (Nocon et al, 2011; Jesse et al. 2004; School Redesign Network, 2007). In these respects, the school's success is not surprising. Nonetheless, urban public high schools serving predominantly low income, multilingual Latino students attaining graduation rates above 85% are exceedingly rare, in part because multilingual students and their families often sense that the dominant culture of the school is dismissive of their home language, their agency, and their potential (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997). In light of this, the insistently high expectations for students, the status afforded Spanish through the use of two-way simultaneous translation in parent meetings, and the encouragement of Spanish in content classrooms may be important to creating the sense of belonging that is manifested in student effort and perseverance. Research attending explicitly to the perceptions, aspirations, and experiences of students (particularly multilingual students transitioning to high school) who cope with academic challenges and adjust their aspirations, would be an important complement to studies like this one, which relies only the perceptions of educators and researchers.

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## INVESTING IN COLLABORATION: PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND THEIR READINESS FOR HOME SCHOOL COLLABORATION

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### Abstract

Home-school collaborations offer the promise of increased social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This qualitative study examines the practices of 25 preservice special education teachers and their implementation of state standards to collaborate with families of children with disabilities in schools during student teaching. Respondents' responses were categorized into two main themes of direct and indirect collaboration activities. Direct collaboration included invitations, meetings conversations, and sharing information. Indirect collaboration included training. Although the preservice special education teachers evidenced typical family involvement strategies, a more integrated connection between theory and practice is necessary for creating effective home-school collaborations.

**Keywords:** Preservice Special Educators, Home School Collaboration, State Standards, Direct and Indirect Activities

*It was the first open house of the school year and the first open house for Lisa. As a new teacher she was excited and nervous, spending hours decorating her classroom with students' work, ensuring that each student's work was represented in some area of the room. She had spent the week preparing for the night's event by calling each of her 35 students' parents or guardians to remind them of the open house. She had even purchased refreshments to add a personal touch and to make her students' parent feel welcome. When the families arrived, they began to ask her about opportunities to assist in the classroom. Many were eager to participate in the classroom experience and some even had questions about the educational content. Lisa realized that she was somewhat unprepared for the parents' offers to collaborate with her and soon felt overwhelmed. Having only completed one course on collaboration with a small emphasis on home-school collaborations, and with minimal field experience working with families, Lisa went home afterwards feeling disillusioned and wondered why her teacher education program had not better prepared her. She thought about all of the things she had learned in her special education teacher*

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*program, like classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessments, but realized collaborating with urban families was something that had not been adequately discussed.*

Lisa is not alone. Of all of the skills that are taught and thought to be valuable to beginning teachers, home-school collaboration is a new and necessary skill that is minimally addressed in teacher education programs (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Many special education teacher programs have limited emphasis on home-school collaboration, which may be the reason why special educators report being unprepared to involve families (Hiatt-Mitchael, 2004; CEC, 2008).

Historically, the importance of home-school collaboration and parental involvement has increased because of requirements of state and national agencies. The California Commission on Teaching Credentials (CCTC) requires that special education teacher preparation programs meet specific home-school collaboration standards. Program standard 4.5 directly relates to home-school collaborations and family involvement (CCTC, n.d). Specifically, this certification standard requires that the candidates document specific activities related to building rapport with families for the purposes of “ensuring a supportive carryover, and facilitating home-school relationships” (CCTC, n.d.). Additionally, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, special education teachers have a responsibility to children with disabilities to involve families in every aspect of their child’s education (Idea, n.d). At the national level of accreditation, although home-school collaborations are currently one of 10 content standards that must be met for recognition by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), this hasn’t always been the case. Clark and McNergney (1990) reviewed the teacher education requirements of 51 state departments and found that although such collaborations were required by the state of California (CA), most states did not mention working with families. Additionally, even though recent research (Blair, 2002) reported an increase in the number of states that require a component for preservice teachers to collaborate with parents, there is still a paucity of home-school collaboration experiences for preservice teachers.

The need for home-school collaboration as a tool to optimize the education process has been consistent over time. Meidel and Reynolds (1999) found gaps between what teachers were trying to do in school and what students were being taught at home because families were not always aware of expectations, thereby leaving them [families] unable to reinforce or extend what was being done in schools. Teacher education programs must look at how they can better prepare teachers to involve families in every aspect of their children’s learning. There is a gap in the literature regarding what kinds of experiences are provided for special education teacher candidates in order for them to become more competent and confident in home-school collaboration. (CEC, 2008; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Purpose**

Collaboration with families is considered to be a critical feature in special education. It has been recognized as key to addressing dropout prevention, over-representation, enhancing student advancement to selective post-secondary education, and improving outcomes for students with disabilities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2006). Therefore, this

study is based on two theories: The Theory of Multiple Influences and The Theory of Cultural Reciprocity.

### **Theory of Multiple Influences**

The researchers utilized a Theory of Multiple Influences that suggests that learning takes place everywhere, not just in schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hidalgo, Sui, & Epstein, 2004). This theory of overlapping spheres includes both influences of external and internal structures. The external structures represent the context of the home, school, and community, which may overlap. The internal structures represent interactions between families and education professionals; education professionals and communities; and families and communities within and across individual and institutional contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gordon, Bridgall, & Meroe, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hidalgo, Sui, & Epstein, 2004; Latunde, 2009). This theory helps explain why home-school collaboration is so important, while Cultural Reciprocity helps to explain how it can be practiced.

### **Theory of Cultural Reciprocity**

The Theory of Cultural Reciprocity acknowledges that one cannot be sensitive to cultural differences unless they are first aware of their own biases and assumptions that guide their thinking and behaviors (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). One cultural assumption related to home-school collaborations is that most families need to be the passive recipients of information on parenting, special education legislation and disabilities. In this example, educators become aware that family members come with diverse levels of knowledge and experiences regarding these topics. A posture of reciprocity believes that communication, growth and learning are bi-directional and all involved are in a position to gain new insights.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the activities of special education teacher candidates with families of children with disabilities. This paper provides a summary of how students enrolled in clinical practice or fieldwork met the criteria of ensuring a supportive carryover, and facilitating home-school relationships with families of children with disabilities. This study was guided by the following research question: What kinds of activities are used to ensure a supportive carryover and facilitate home-school collaboration?

### **Method**

This qualitative study gathered data using a document collection process. This type of field research collects and “assemble[s] written materials and make[s] a written report”(Lofland, 1974). The activities of 25 special education teacher candidates enrolled in clinical practice were collected at the end of a three-unit course. Candidates were given a syllabus containing the California state teaching standards 4.1-4.5 related to home-school collaboration and were asked to document the activities they did to meet these

standards. The syllabus did not specify what the student needed to do to meet the standards, only that they document the activity, number of hours, and location in which the activities occurred. For the purposes of documenting activities, students could document between 10-100 hours of activities for any specific standard.

### **Context of the Study**

For the past four years a special education teacher preparation program at a private university in the Los Angeles area included a collaboration course. The course includes a family involvement component and is required for all students who seek to become credentialed to work in mild and moderate special education settings from grades kindergarten to twelfth grade. The course content includes communicating students' strengths & challenges, engaging families in decision-making, co-teaching, collaborative consultation, and providing information to families on community resources. The three-semester unit "clinical practice" course is consistent with what the state of California requires, and with the recommendations of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in order to prepare teachers for family involvement.

### **Participants**

To examine the kinds of activities in which preservice teachers participated in to meet the criteria of facilitating home-school relationships, a sample of 25 special education teacher candidates was studied. All 25 student teachers held bachelor's degrees, were enrolled in a special education teacher education program, and 70 percent were pursuing a master's degree. The participants included two students who were working with a state-issued intern credential who acted as the teacher of record (interns), and 23 students (student teachers) placed under the supervision of a master teacher. Both types of students were used in this study and were responsible for the same coursework and meeting the standards. Additionally, all participants were in the last semester of the program and were assigned a university mentor who provided them with individualized support including site visits to nearby urban schools.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for the current study included self-reported activities of special education teacher candidates related to questions regarding home-school collaborations. The student teachers were asked to document activities, over a period of 18 weeks that specifically addressed building rapport with families of children with disabilities to ensure a supportive carry-over and facilitate the home-school relationship. All ten mentors were sent an email requesting all responses to standard 4.1-4.5. At the end of the course, five of the ten mentors sent the responses to the researchers. Although one of the researchers is the university field supervisor for the course and program, the investigation was conducted jointly.

Five of the ten mentors provided the researchers with data from the students they mentored during one term. Each mentor was instructed to email the responses after they de-identified the documentation of the activities related to the specific standards 4.1-4.5 related to home-school collaboration. The university mentors de-identified data of 25

former special education clinical practice students and provided them to the researchers over the course of 3 weeks. At the time the researchers collected the data from university mentors, the participants were no longer in the special education credential program, thus the study was given an exempt status from a full IRB review.

The data were analyzed using topic coding. According to Richards, (2005) topic coding is used to “allocate passages to topics” and is the “hack work of the qualitative researcher, labeling text according to its subject” (p. 88). The researchers worked collaboratively to develop themes and analyze the data. The data was reviewed several times to allow for the emergence of patterns and themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In analyzing the data, the participants’ exact words were used (Creswell, 2004) and the number of occurrences of a particular activity was recorded.

## **Results and Discussion**

This study focused on the kinds of activities that are used to facilitate home-school relationships with special education preservice teachers and urban families. The kinds of activities that the preservice teachers responded to revealed important levels of communication and contact with parents. The sections below describe some primary themes found in the data. The themes that consistently emerged in the data were:

- Special education teacher candidates communicated directly with families. Participants consistently stated that they called family members to invite them to or remind them of meetings.
- Information was shared with families formally and informally.
- Training activities were considered indirect methods for building rapport with families.

### **Direct Collaboration Activities**

**Invitations to school programs.** In this study, inviting families to school programs and events was a method used by 6 (24%) of the special education teacher candidates to build rapport and facilitate home-school communication. Participants reported making phone calls home as a method for inviting families to programs and events. “I called all parents to remind them of open house tomorrow night,” noted one participant. Teachers’ invitations have been found to play a vital role in how the home-school relationship will play out (Keyes, 2000). It was not always the actual invitation but how families were invited that made the difference. A few of the events and programs extended to parents included back to school night, musicals, fundraising, holiday events, and open house. This finding was consistent with Katz and Bauch’s (1999) study of how student teachers developed home-school collaboration by making phone calls by inviting parents to participate.

**Formal meetings.** Initial meetings between teachers and families can be a determining factor in the development of the home-school relationship (Keyes, 2000). Sometimes it is the first chance families and teachers have to exchange information about a child, ask questions or share concerns. Depending on how the meeting is structured it can be a chance for teachers and families to develop a plan to collaborate by sharing information about a child’s strengths, interests, past successes and challenges, the



curriculum, and specific instructional strategies employed in the classroom. One participant wrote, “Show the parent the accomplishment of the student attending resource specialist program (RSP).” In this study, 40% of the teacher candidates initiated contact with families to request or remind family members of meetings. “I called the parents to remind them of the upcoming IEP,” is what one student noted. Most participants who noted this activity simply wrote “parent meeting or IEP meeting.” For special education students, these formal meetings with parents were usually IEP meetings, however, a few were other formal meetings. Home visits were also reported to discuss concerns and used as a means of building rapport. Depending on how the home-visit came about and if the family was comfortable with the home-visit, home-visits can be a strategy for building cultural reciprocity with diverse families (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999).

**Informal discussions or unscheduled meetings.** Some special education teacher candidates believed that unscheduled meetings and impromptu conversations met the criteria of the standard, but felt less comfortable with them than scheduled meetings (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Since teachers and families come with different skills and expectations of how the teacher-family interactions should work, communication and shared goals are very important for building reciprocity and enhancing the multiple structures that influence the student (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). On one hand, families and the teacher may have specific skills and think that all of the interactions must be distant and professional while the other may want to develop a more informal relationship. Informal discussions make this possible. In this study informal discussions were impromptu, addressed both concerns and positive news and occurred during face-to-face interactions. “I stand at the door each morning to greet all of the parents,” shared one participant. This indicates that sometimes the conversations were when the parents dropped off their children for school or when they picked their children up in the afternoon. Five participants reported holding impromptu conversations with a family member to share both good news and concerns.

**Sharing information.** “I called the parent to share with them ways to increase their child’s fluency,” was one of the responses from a participant. Five of the twenty-five participants documented specific activities related to sharing information with families. The information shared with families was both positive and negative. Information shared regarding concerns about a lack of progress or behavior significantly outweighed the positive information shared with families according to the documentation.

Telephone calls were the most common way to communicate, followed by, writing notes and texting messages. “I called the parent to compliment the child (Participant 1, Personal communication, 2008),” and “I communicated with parents through phone calls and all of the parents were very supportive and continued to provide support at home” (Participant 2, Personal communication, 2010), were reported as examples of sharing information. Another two participants reported utilizing meetings to share information with family members on specific learning strategies. “I met with the parent to show her how to use TouchMath, because I use it at home with my son and in class” (Participant 3, Personal communication, 2010), reported a respondent. In this study, special education teacher candidates considered sharing information with families as a method to ensure carry-over of a supportive environment. Theories of Multiple Influences and Cultural Reciprocity espouse sharing information with families as

essential for home-school collaboration. When respondents initiated positive contacts, they found that those efforts enhanced school programs and events with relationship building components and built and facilitate home-school collaboration.

### **Indirect Collaboration Activities**

Several of the participants (24%) participated in more than 18 hours of activities related to training or conferencing with paraprofessionals under the standard 4.5 for building rapport with families. One participant wrote, “Conducted paraprofessional training classroom management” while another participant wrote, “Instructions for aides [done] weekly for activities.” The rationale for this being viewed as a collaborative activity is unclear, but it could possibly be that although there may not be direct contact with the families, the candidates may feel that the training provides an opportunity for building collaboration, which will eventually benefit home-school relationships. Participants reported ten hours of assessment and three hours of writing IEPs as activities aimed at building rapport with special education families to improve home-school communication and ensure carry-over.

### **Discussion**

The literature of family engagement in special education is clear. Teachers are expected to make families full partners in the educational process. In this study we learned that preservice teachers used school programs, meetings, and training as means to nurture the home-school relationship and build rapport. What we did not see were activities that demonstrated shared decision-making, reciprocal teaching and learning, and collaboration. Research on improved outcomes in special education consistently suggests that families that provide information on their child’s strengths and help to monitor progress have improved outcomes (NCSET, 2006; Whitbread, n.d). There was no evidence that teachers used formal meetings, informal meetings or programs to prepare families for the IEP meetings, elicit ideas for goals, elicit information on strengths or work collaboratively to monitor progress. The preservice teachers’ interactions mostly demonstrated one-way communication and not the bi-directional communication expected in collaboration (Dettmer, et. al., 2009).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Research on high-performing schools espouse a Theory of Multiple Influences and maintain better communication and home-school relationships than poor performing schools (Civic Enterprises, 2008). Lisa may have benefited from a more comprehensive special education teacher program and felt more prepared to engage families in schools because of it. “Teacher preparation for engagement is a matter of equity as low performance among minority groups persist. Family involvement plays a significant role in eliminating these inequities” (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). Research (Dettmer et. al. 2009; Williams, 2007) suggests five steps for collaborating with families: 1) examining personal values, 2) building collaborative relationships, 3) initiating home-school interactions, 4) individualizing for families, and 5) evaluating home-school collaborations. Successful models employ Cultural Reciprocity for home-school

collaborations by practicing respect for the family as the first teacher; empowerment for the family, and positioning themselves to learn from families while recognizing that all families want the best for their child (Williams, 2007). Although establishing rapport is among one of the most cited strategies for building trust and effective partnerships with families most teacher education programs offer little direct instruction for building trust, rapport building and collaborating with families (Kunjufu, 2005; Louque, 2009; Thompson, 2009). There was no evidence in this study that preservice teachers had any support from mentors or specific activities for building rapport with families.

In this study we found that the clinical practice experiences were not closely linked to course content or the collaboration class; they did not require students to use specific assessments or activities learned in their collaboration classroom. This connection is essential to connect links between theory and practice. Also recommended is a combination of approaches to creating a strong foundation for home-school collaboration in special education teacher programs. Offering a continuum of education for family engagement is a promising practice for teacher education programs. One course in addition to clinical practice may have had some positive effects on student perceptions of home-school collaboration, but more should be done in this area to reap the benefits for all involved.

A more comprehensive approach might include adding another course, strategically placing students in field experiences where they can interact with diverse families, including home-school collaboration topics and activities throughout the program, using specific collaboration rubrics and assessments, specific collaboration activities, offering seminars on family engagement, utilizing field work supervisors to guide teacher candidates in an array of home-school collaboration activities and providing clinical practice students with specific home-school collaboration standard activities (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Katz & Bauch, 1999).

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**“EVERYTHING THAT’S CHALLENGING IN MY SCHOOL MAKES ME A BETTER TEACHER”: NEGOTIATING TENSIONS IN LEARNING TO TEACH FOR EQUITY**

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**Abstract**

This paper responds to the call for further inquiry into the experiences of graduates of urban-focused teacher education programs. I present and analyze the experiences of Mia, a White, monolingual English female who earned licensure in secondary social studies through a graduate-level, equity-focused teacher preparation program before accepting a position at a large, traditional, diverse, underperforming, urban middle school. The paper explores how negotiating tensions in curriculum and interactions with colleagues in her school context contributes to her identity development with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Teacher identity development, culturally relevant instruction, teaching for equity, urban teaching, teaching context

The achievement gap between White middle-class students and poor and working-class students of color has been well documented in the literature (Williams, 2003). Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted that a significant factor in this achievement discrepancy is the cultural and linguistic gap between a teaching force that is overwhelmingly White, middle class, and monolingual and a public school student population that grows increasingly diverse each year (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Although the majority of teachers—84 percent in 2011—are White females (Feistritzer, 2011), many teacher education programs are working to bridge this cultural divide between educators and their K-12 students. Programs are bolstering curriculum and field experiences to help preservice teachers develop culturally relevant, equity-oriented instructional approaches and dispositions that will help students make academic gains and achieve robust educational outcomes (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, as Cochran-Smith (2004) noted, few empirical studies exist on the experiences of these “diversity-prepared” teachers once they are hired.

This paper responds to this call for further inquiry into the experiences of graduates of equity-focused teacher education programs. Its purpose is to present and analyze the experiences of Mia (pseudonym), a White, female, monolingual recent college graduate who earned her licensure in secondary social studies through a graduate level urban teacher preparation program (UTEP; pseudonym) and then accepted a

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position at a large, traditional, diverse, urban middle school in the western United States. The school serves a predominantly Latino community and is “on watch” and being audited by the state because of historically low test scores. This research focuses on determining how negotiating tensions in the school context contributes to the identity development of a novice teacher with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy. Specifically, I explore tensions within the curriculum and in interactions with colleagues.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Two strands form the theoretical grounding for this paper: (1) the situated nature of purposive activity in cultural, historical contexts/activity settings and (2) identity construction from a sociocultural perspective. Development and learning cannot be separated from the activities and social contexts in which they take place. According to Mercer (1992), “All learning is situated, because any task or activity does not exist independently of the ways in which participants contextualize it” (p. 33). How people learn and develop, as well as the kinds of knowledge they develop, is intricately connected to the various activities and contexts in which the learning experience occurs. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, individuals and the contexts in which they operate are not viewed as separate constructs. The situated nature of development (Putnam & Borko, 1997, 2000) “suggests that the study of learning, especially in educational settings, must treat context and culture as part of what is being studied, not variables to be partialled out” (Mercer, 1992, p. 33). These theories are particularly relevant for studying how elements of the context in which Mia learns to teach have influenced her development and learning as a teacher for equity.

In addition, in sociocultural theory, identity construction is considered to be a form of human development that occurs by engaging in goal-oriented action within various social settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Similarly, Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) remarked, “As teachers develop identity, context matters” (p. 90). Smagorinsky et al. (2004) observed that “one’s identity is not simply the emergence of internal traits and dispositions but their development through engagement with others in cultural practice” (p. 21). Negotiating tensions, for example, those between the context and one’s identity, can contribute to identity development (Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

### **Methodology**

This study, which represents a piece of a larger research project, used qualitative, interpretive, case study methodology. Data sources included (1) field notes, audio files, and videotape transcripts from 12 hours of observation in Mia’s classes during a 6-month period; (2) transcripts from 22 hours of semistructured interviews (16 with Mia and 6 with her support providers); and (3) artifacts, such as course assignments, lesson plans, student work, and school-issued documents.

Data analysis began during data collection and was iterative and recursive. The process was inspired by Spradley’s (1980) domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis and LeCompte and Shensul’s (1999) stages of (1) isolating specific items and working to label them accurately; (2) looking for and articulating patterns and structures; and (3) clarifying meaning by “linking together or finding consistent relationships among

patterns, components, constituents, and structures” (p. 177). The validity and trustworthiness of the results were established through triangulation, adapting previously validated interview protocols (see Peressini, Borko, & Romagnano, 2004), member checking, and prolonged observation.

### **Participant and Setting**

Like many who enter the teaching profession, Mia is a White, monolingual, English-speaking female. Mia grew up in the southern United States in a fairly sheltered environment “with a tight circle of friends who were all like me: None of our parents are divorced. We’re all White. We all come from fairly middle class families. And we stuck together” (Personal communication, January 19, 2006). In her family, she was “taught to be a peacemaker in the sense of not causing controversy when there is no need to cause it” (Personal communication, June 11, 2007).

During data collection, Mia was a first-year teacher at South Hill Middle School (pseudonym). The school’s demographics reflect nationwide trends of increasing diversity. Of the school’s almost 800 students, approximately 75% are from low-income families, nearly 70% are Latino (mostly of Mexican origin), about 27% are White, and small percentages are African American, Asian, American Indian, or of mixed heritage. More than half of the students learned something other than English as their first language. The demographics of Mia’s classes are comparable to these statistics.

### **Findings: Mia’s Case Story**

#### **Tensions in Curriculum**

At South Hill Middle School, Mia has a fairly prescribed curriculum in terms of the topics that must be addressed in her sixth-grade social studies courses, as the school is “on watch” and being audited by the state due to its historically low test scores. However, she generally has some freedom in how she chooses to address the topics and which materials and resources she selects. Mia’s approaches to various tensions that arise in the curriculum at South Hill illustrate important aspects of her evolving identity as a culturally responsive educator.

Mia was initially excited about the mandated unit on Mexican history because she thought she would be able to make it relevant and meaningful for her predominantly Latino students. However, the content turned out “to be not really culturally responsive.” She lamented, “What they ended up learning about was some guy who lived 200 years ago who wound up reforming the Catholic Church. I mean *that’s* not what they’re interested in.” (Personal communication, April 14, 2006). The assigned textbook’s portrayal of Mexican history contributed to the problem. The book’s coverage of the topic was “not really inclusive; it’s just about wars and men, and that just is not culturally responsive to me,” Mia recounted. “I don’t want the Mexican girls in my class to think, ‘Where are we in this history? This is supposed to be our history and I don’t see anybody like me’” (Personal communication, March 3, 2006).

To balance out the textbook’s “wars and men” perspective and generate more interest among her students, Mia developed a subsequent mini-unit on famous Latina women in the United States. Students had a chance to learn about women who had



successfully followed career paths in which the students themselves were potentially interested (e.g., lawyer, author, singer, painter, civil rights activist) through research, writing, and a class presentation. Mia hoped that the Latina women they chose to research would serve as role models for her students.

Although Mia acknowledged that the famous Latinas project could have gone further in helping students develop conceptual understanding about the historical significance of the women's contributions, the project did at least introduce students to the role of women in the history of Latinos, thereby filling in the blanks of the textbook's portrayals to some extent. Mia's observation of the textbook's limited perspective and her subsequent adaptations illustrate an important aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy: identifying when the contributions or perspectives of certain groups are absent from the existing curriculum and adapting it to reflect a more inclusive approach.

Another aspect of culturally responsive teaching is to explicitly address issues of race, skin color, class, culture, gender, and so forth. Doing so is never straightforward or predictable, and the ensuing discussions are often emotional, political, and value laden. During the Mexican history unit, for example, Mia wanted her students to understand that "many Mexicans today are a blend of Spanish and indigenous cultures" because Mexico was "basically a Spanish colony for awhile." She had noticed that her many students of Mexican descent seemed to "have this sense of 'We're just Mexican and that's what we are'—like they've always been Mexican and nothing else." Mia wanted to clear up potential misperceptions: "They need to understand that part of their culture comes from Spain, that there really is a mix of cultures in Mexico." To help them comprehend, she asked a few of the students, "Why is your skin color brown?" When they didn't offer much of a response, she told them, "It's because you're a mix of this darker Native American person and these light-skinned White people from Spain." She continued,

And it was kind of shock to them that Spanish people are White people, too. They were like, "Really, they're White?" Yes, they're White. And then when Mexico originally became its own country, it was the White people, like Miguel Hidalgo who was born in Mexico, who were leading this movement. It was people of Spanish descent who no longer wanted to be a part of the Spanish crown... But, I didn't get that across.

When asked to reflect on why she thought she did not make her point understood, she acknowledged that she "felt uncomfortable...even talking about skin color." She questioned whether she should have asked the students to think about why their own skin color was brown, and she said the whole exchange "was very difficult." I asked her to say more about her discomfort:

**Author:** You said you feel uncomfortable talking about skin color. Is that just with your kids? Or do you feel like, just in terms of the identity of who you are, that makes you feel uncomfortable?

**M:** Yeah, I think in general I think it's something that I just am not totally comfortable with. Because like when I was growing up it was something that you

don't point out. Does that make sense? Because if you do, then that makes you not accepting?

**Author:** Kind of like the mindset of not seeing differences? Like, "Oh, we're all just the same?" Kind of like that?

**M:** Right. Obviously there are differences, and I think it's okay to say that. Because I did. I did say that to my students. But it wasn't something that I was totally comfortable with, which is probably the biggest part of the reason why it was hard for me to teach it (Personal communication, April 14, 2006.).

This passage illustrates one of the ways in which an aspect of Mia's identity—namely, how she was taught while growing up not to discuss people's skin color differences—shapes her approach to discussing this issue in the classroom. Addressing topics such as this one can be difficult and takes courage on the part of teachers, as reflected in Mia's comments.

These scenarios illustrate some of the effects of the mandated curriculum on Mia and ways that she responds to it. She attempts to make connections to students' background knowledge, culture, and interests so that they will be able to find more meaning in the content than they might otherwise. She said that these adaptations ultimately make her a better teacher. Thinking back on her first year at South Hill, she remarked that having to work within the constraints of the mandated curriculum "has really taught me a lot about culturally responsive teaching."

**M:** So I think that the curriculum challenges me to really understand what culturally responsive teaching is and to work really hard to become a culturally responsive teacher...It forces me to think of ways that I can be culturally responsive but still stay in line with the status quo—does that make sense?

**Author:** The status quo meaning the curriculum you're required to teach?

**M:** Right. And the way that it's normally taught, and having to fit in with that (Personal communication, June 22, 2006).

This passage alludes to an aspect of Mia's identity that is evident across many data sources - namely, the way she takes responsibility for ensuring that students get what they need to have effective learning experiences, no matter what constraints she faces within the context of South Hill Middle School. Her proactive approach to problem solving when faced with potential barriers contributes to her identity development. She is able to take many aspects of her school setting (such as prescribed curriculum) that could potentially constrain her equity-focused teaching and turn them into affordances.

### **Tensions in Interactions with School Colleagues**

During one interview, Mia made the following comments, which characterize some of the tensions she experiences with her colleagues:

Something else that I still need to learn how to do is—you need to know when to open your mouth with the rest of the staff and how to pick your battles. In my case, I need to be able to pick a battle to begin with because I normally just go along with the flow. But I'm recognizing that, if you just continue to go along with the flow, then that voice—that voice of social justice or cultural responsiveness or whatever—is not going to be heard. In my school, people are just not talking about the things that I think we should be talking about. And so I've been trying to coach myself on being more assertive (Personal communication, January 23, 2006).

Multiple data sources point to tensions in interactions between Mia and some of her colleagues at South Hill, mostly relating to viewpoints about diversity and equity. In fact, Mia succinctly stated, "I'm *about* something that other people in the building aren't" (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

Mia's responses to various tensions that arise illustrate other important aspects of her evolving identity as a culturally responsive educator. When asked about the extent to which the whole faculty had discussions about equity issues and the ways in which Mia perceived those interactions to mediate her conceptions of teaching for equity, her professional identity, and her practices, she responded,

I just feel like it's a very missing piece. I think we talk about SIOP [an instructional protocol to assist English language learners] and how we need to be implementing SIOP, but it's always in a perspective of just "this is going to help our students be more successful on the tests," not that this is going to help our students maintain their language or help support them in learning a new language, that kind of thing. We just don't ever talk about how the students' culture affects our school. We just really don't - unless it's in a negative way (Personal communication, June 22, 2006).

Mia expressed concern that at least some of her colleagues "have a superficial view of what culture is and how it should be recognized in the classroom" and that sometimes her colleagues' comments seem deficit oriented. She explained,

The team conversations about students' home life and cultural diversity always seem very negative to me. It was just very, like, well, "the parents aren't doing this for the kid and it's because they're—because they don't speak English, or because they're poor, or because they're working all the time"—or something like that. It wasn't really a lot about positive things that were going on in the home. Or about things that the kids were getting at home and bringing to school (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

On the other hand, Mia took a step back to reflect on the context of the differences she perceives between her stance and that of some of her colleagues:

When I'm listening to other teachers I can see the difference in those viewpoints almost immediately when they start talking. And at moments I have to be very patient because I have to remember that, if I had not gone through this [UTEP]

program, I would have thought the same way. I would be making the same comments (Personal communication, January 23, 2006).

When asked to reflect on how she thought all-faculty gatherings influenced her development as a teacher for equity, Mia remarked:

It makes me want to be more clear in who I am. And like what I'm trying to accomplish. It makes me want to speak up more. But it hasn't got to the point where I feel like totally brave enough to do that in that huge room full of people (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

This disposition of learning to speak up in the face of biased, deficit-oriented comments is an aspect of Mia's identity that shows up frequently in the data. On the heels of these comments, she provided a specific example of a time during an all-faculty meeting when she tried on her emerging identity as someone who speaks up in the face of comments that have the potential to oppress others:

We were having a discussion one day about high expectations, and someone made a comment like...“Well, *some* people need to work at Wendy's, so it might as well be our students” or something like that. And my response was, “*We* are not the people who choose what roles people go into.” And my comment was totally misunderstood. [People thought I meant] “we don't choose it; some cosmic force chooses it, and we just sort of go with it.” What I meant was: we need to empower all our students so that *they* get to make the choice. But that wasn't heard and I felt guilty because I didn't continue to explain myself. And I felt kind of silly because I was like, this is not what I want to say (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

These passages illustrate how Mia refines her identity by negotiating tensions that arise within her interactions with colleagues. Mia stated several times that the context of the UTEP—with its clear goal of developing in its participants both awareness of and strategies for ensuring equitable educational experiences for *all* students—influenced her concepts and helped her become more aware of equity and social justice issues. Now, when she encounters comments that she finds inappropriate based on her newly developing understandings, she does not feel right not saying something to interrupt the practice of using language that constitutes oppression to some degree. However, as seen in the passage just quoted, perhaps she has not yet developed the language with which to explain exactly why the remarks seem offensive to her. She is apparently much more aware about inequities in society than she was prior to her UTEP participation. However, she is still developing the concrete tools to describe the ways in which systemic factors in society advantage and disadvantage certain groups and to take social action toward reducing prejudice and inequity.

## Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

In this paper, I set out to explore how negotiating tensions in the school context contributes to the identity development of a novice teacher with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy. Mia's case story presents various tensions that she experiences both within the school curriculum and with her colleagues.

One might think that these potential limitations of the school context would constrain Mia's overall experience of learning to teach for social justice. In some ways, they do serve to confine. However, these tensions forced Mia to engage in problem solving, a process which contributed to her identity development and her adoption of certain conceptions and practices of culturally responsive teaching. As sociocultural theory suggests, negotiating tensions can be productive (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). In Mia's situation, she had to negotiate tensions between her evolving identity and the context of her school. She pushed back on the potentially limiting aspects of South Hill Middle School and accommodated them in ways that were better suited to her identity. For example, she pushed back on her colleagues' practice of using deficit-oriented language about students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Negotiating this tension mediated changes in her identity in terms of clarifying her own beliefs and learning to "find her voice" so she can speak out against bias and negative language. Because of Mia's disposition of taking responsibility and making the best of potentially difficult situations, she claims that these perceived limitations actually make her a more effective teacher. She even commented, "I think everything that's challenging in my school makes me a better teacher (Personal communication, June 22, 2006)."

Mia's case story presents an example of the potential effects of equity-focused teacher education. Like many other White, middle-class women who enroll in teacher education programs, Mia entered with an open disposition, a willingness to accept and explore her potentially sheltered viewpoints, a naïveté about culture, and a curiosity to learn. The combination of her teacher education focused on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice in urban schools and the learning opportunities afforded her by encountering tensions in her curriculum and in interactions with colleagues helped Mia begin to shift her beliefs, attitudes, and practices about culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy.

Perhaps this case story will provide ideas or inspiration for novice teachers who face some of the same challenges that Mia did, either in their school context or in their own identities as teachers. Perhaps this story will also inspire teacher educators to realize that their efforts in guiding candidates to learn to teach for social justice and equity do, indeed, make a difference. Such effects might not be immediately evident. As Darling-Hammond stated, "Learning to teach for social justice is a lifelong undertaking" (2002, p. 201). Indeed, Nieto concluded that "Becoming a multicultural teacher entails becoming a multicultural person" (cited in Zeichner & Hoefl, 1996, p. 529).

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