Knowing is Not Enough: The Promise of Community and School-Based Teacher Preparation

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"You don't live where I live," stated my eighth-grade student, Alvin.

"You are right. I don't live here. Tell me more." The other students became engaged into the conversation. Other eighth graders started chiming in to educate me, their teacher, about the community.

Alvin led the discussion, "You want us to turn in these [worksheets], but when we leave school, we got things to do. We got to take care of our little brothers and sisters. We got things to do. We got to make it."

On the surface, it would appear that Alvin was saying, "Don't give us homework; we have other things to do." However, that is not the case. Alvin was asking, in his eighth-grade way, that I first understand who he was and what he had to offer. He was saying this: "Understand and appreciate me. Affirm who I am. Teach me, keeping in mind who I am as you teach me what I need to be successful." He was asking me to examine my practice and frankly, my low, routine expectations.

Alvin was right. Had I completely ignored the sociocultural lens that impacted the school in tremendous ways? Had I played school with them, blamed them, patted myself on the back for trying without actually deconstructing my own teaching and its true impact on my students? Had I not considered the role of out-of-school learning and students' families and communities into my teaching?

This moment has long impacted my teaching and how I see myself as a teacher and teacher educator. It is important in any context, but particularly, marginalized spaces, such as an urban context, that the students know that the teacher understands the academic, social and cultural power of the students, expects the best from the students, affirms who they are, works with the community to accomplish learning, and teaches them in ways in which the richness and depth of their new understanding can be best demonstrated and applied. This is urban teaching—complex, relational, patient, caring, affirming, smart, connected,

strategic, important. The alternative is to teach "business as usual" without regard for our urban students' unique needs, concerns, and promise.

In the United States, 49.1 million students attend public schools. Of this number, 14.4 million—about 30% of the public school student population—attend school in urban areas (NCES, 2010). The population who attends urban schools is comprised of 34.3% Hispanic students; 30.3% White students; 25.2% Black students; and 10.2 % of the students are Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or two or more races. Our urban students, important in number, diversity, and as individuals, deserve the best education—the type of education we give our wealthiest and richest students. To do this, however, we must also recognize, not ignore, the challenges that impact our urban students. Students who live in urban areas experience "economic disparity" in that "over 80 percent of the high-density poverty areas in the United States are located in the nation's 100 largest cities. A disproportionate number of minority students and their families are plagued by this concentration of urban poverty" (Kincheloe, 2010, p. 5). In addition, the students face not academic performance gaps but "opportunity gaps" (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Despite the challenges, we know that urban schools are places of resilience, requiring resilient educators. Preparing a teacher to instruct culturally diverse students requires *enhanced* preparation—one that appreciates the richness of every child's ability, values the families and communities of the students, and accesses students' ability to create, think and process information in non-traditional ways using culturally relevant teaching and sustaining pedagogies (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Darder, 2010; Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Paris & Aim, 2017; Voltz, Collins, Patterson, & Sims, 2008). To do this effectively, schools of education must design programs and opportunities for teacher candidates that meet the needs of the 21st century urban students.

Working with and placing teacher candidates in urban school contexts and communities, though, has not been without challenge from my students. In almost twenty years of doing this work as a teacher educator, I can remember two of my students, both White females, vehemently opposed teaching in urban schools for their practicum hours aligned with the Methods course. The first prospective teacher admitted

that she was afraid to teach in an urban school. Her reluctance was founded in the local nightly news and rumors that circulated in her suburban community, perpetuating fear and despair. The second preservice teacher was so upset at her placement in an urban school that she contacted my department chair and reported me as "punishing" her and "disliking" her since her entrance into the program. I counted this as such a disrespectful, deficit view of urban communities and families—her view that negative consequences were synonymous with placement in urban contexts. In both instances, though, the students benefited tremendously from the urban teaching, learning to deconstruct their own thinking about race and class in the urban setting. But still this was not enough—a start, but not enough.

The literature certainly includes the importance of teachers knowing the community and being familiar with the culture of the community. But to prepare today's teachers, it is not enough to *know* the community and resources (Ball, 2011; Milner, 2015), but also, it is important for teacher candidates to *become involved* and have actual interaction with the communities that impact students' lives in sustainable ways to provide them with a holistic picture of the whole child and the community. Building on Ball's work on generativity, this processing of new learning for teacher candidates must constantly develop new critical questions and thinking (Haddix & Roja, 2011), allowing preservice teachers to build capacity to create new worlds and opportunities (Morrell, 2012) for students that are central to development, a *generative critical pedagogy*—ongoing critical questioning and dialogue that closes the knowing and doing gap.

Urban Community/School-Based Literacy Centers

Years later, as a result of my experiences with Alvin (the middle school student) and my teacher candidates (the ones placed in urban settings), my students and I (along with the Red Mountain Writing Project and GEAR UP) developed literacy centers in eight urban high schools, which provided preservice teachers time to work with the students and learn about community outside of the traditional teaching spaces. This work has allowed the organic nature of teaching, learning, and relationship-building to emerge, confronting barriers head-on that can often build division among people when there is limited interaction and conversation. One teacher candidate wrote in her literacy center reflection log:

Today's [urban] students may be bored with our pre-selected booklists, but they are not bored with reading—to the contrary, they get excited when they discover books they find relevant and interesting. As teachers, it is our job to seize upon this excitement and provide students with the time and resources necessary to foster a true love for reading.

Having an opportunity to work with students directly, learn with them, and participate in their communities outside of the classroom impacted how the teacher candidate interacted with the students. As a result, she could begin to challenge the notion that urban students, in particular, do not like reading. She saw them in a different light—readers— but of the material that captured their interests and imaginations.

That's why *knowing* is not enough (Ball, 2009). Knowing only implies that we have read or have some understanding about a task. But *doing*, the application, the critical review of knowledge and its work in action, is an opportunity to create sustainable generative learning with students, which occurs best when we are an active part of the process as learners ourselves. Teacher candidates must have opportunities, not just in classrooms, but in communities, to better understand how to improve learning. Looking at children through a mirror, driving through communities to count grocery stores, counting the number of parents at PTA night, listening to unproductive talk about community deficits, assigning teacher candidates three students to observe with no outcome—none of this is enough. If we want culturally responsive, engaging, and curious teachers, we must provide action-oriented, responsive, generative, problem-solving, resiliency-building opportunities in schools and communities for teacher candidates to grow, ask questions, challenge their own notions and develop as advocates and scholars. *Knowing* alone has left the building.

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