Chapter 9
Collaborating with Urban Professional Development Schools to Effectively Prepare Elementary Urban Teachers: Embedding Pre-Service Teachers in Authentic Urban Settings

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ABSTRACT

The diversity of students in schools is rapidly increasing while the demographics of urban teachers are remaining constant (Banks & Banks, 2000). This develops a cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic divide that can lead to disconnects in the classroom which can negatively impact student academic outcomes (Clem & Connell, 2004). This chapter demonstrates how one university partnered with two urban public elementary schools to help better prepare pre-service teachers to be successful in the urban school setting. The partnership focused on providing experiences based on Milner’s (2006) three key factors: cultural and racial awareness and insight, critical reflection, and the bridging of theory and practice. These factors were embedded into the coursework of the pre-service teachers through academic, social, and experiential opportunities that allowed them to develop the effective skills and dispositions necessary to be successful educators in an urban setting. The experiences enhanced the success of all involved: students, PST, teachers, and university faculty.
INTRODUCTION

The preparation of highly skilled and effective pre-service teachers (PST) is the prime responsibility for Institutions of Higher Education. While this holds true for all PST, it is especially vital in our preparation of those who will enter an urban elementary classroom. Challenges faced in the external backdrop of urban schools are numerous; however, challenges faced internally, within the school walls, provide opportunities where teacher educators can have the greatest impact.

As the diversity of students in schools continues to increase, the demographics of the urban teacher have remained constant: white, monolingual, middle class, female (Banks and Banks, 2000). This cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic divide can lead to disconnect between not only the content of the classroom, but the ability of the teacher and student to form a strong, trusting relationship. It is vital to know the impact the teacher-student relationship has on academic outcomes (Clem, A. & Connell, P., 2004).

So how do we better prepare our PST to be successful urban elementary school teachers? According to Milner (2006), there are three key factors: (a) cultural and racial awareness and insight, (b) critical reflection, and (c) the bridging of theory and practice. At our institution, we have attempted to address each of these factors through a series of academic, social and experiential opportunities provided to our PST throughout their coursework.

It would be naive to think that, we as an institution, could achieve this goal in isolation; therefore, we have partnered with two urban professional development schools (PDS) to provide experiences that we feel can more adequately prepare PST for the challenges they will encounter in the future. We have worked on strengthening the partnership through strategic collaboration and purposeful conversations that have helped to enhance the success of all involved: students, PST, teachers, and university faculty.

WHY THE URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS DEVELOPED

Overall, the mission of the PDS partnerships aims to raise student achievement, strengthen teaching practices, and nurture PST by working with master teachers and being actively engaged in the school community. The goal in developing and continuing a PDS partnership is to encourage collaboration between university faculty, administrators, and teachers, to determine specific areas of need, develop a plan of action, and implement that plan for improvement in those areas identified. This can be in the form of professional development, small meetings, mentoring, providing hands-on assistance, providing materials, or partnering in planning and implementing parent nights. A further goal is to provide an authentic setting where PST are able to observe and apply theories taught in their education courses. The overall goal for the university and the PDS is to leverage the partnership in order to raise student achievement and provide an opportunity that is mutually beneficial to both partners. Students at the school sites are benefiting from the network in multiple ways: teachers are receiving individualized, ongoing, meaningful PD and our PST provide classroom assistance with whole class, small groups and one-on-one enrichment, re-teaching, and mentoring. These are only a few reasons the development of urban PDS partners not only furthers the education profession; but, also advances equity within schools and the broader community.

The partnerships in the two particular urban elementary schools were initially developed for strategic reasons. In the first school partnership, a university faculty member had worked for two years on developing and implementing professional development (PD) to help bolster the literacy skills of the classroom teachers. PD sessions were focused on developing a shared understanding of the Balanced Literacy Approach. On-going professional development sessions were conducted