

Becoming an Urban Educator: Intellectual Growth and Development of Social Justice in Re-Designed Courses Serving the Urban Teacher Preparation Program

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The purpose of this project (funded by an ISU SoTL Program Grant) was to evaluate the efficacy of a multidisciplinary Course Development Grant Program designed to prepare ISU pre-service teachers to work in underserved settings. The rationale for this multidisciplinary program is to provide resources to faculty across departments and colleges to redesign an existing course to better prepare pre-service teachers to work in underserved, urban communities. Grantees participate in a 3-4 day experiential learning trip to underserved Chicago neighborhoods and Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and are provided the necessary support to re-design their courses in such a way to better prepare university students to work in this context. Further, as articulated in the program guidelines, by better understanding challenges that face people, schools, and communities in underserved settings, it is hoped that these students will “see a need to critique the systematic sources of racial and economic inequality in our society and schools” (Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline, 2009). Instructors address these program initiatives by infusing relevant course content concerning urban issues, creating assignments that provoke awareness of social justice issues and encouraging an experiential trip to CPS for their students.

It was expected that students who enrolled in such classes would display more positive beliefs about urban education, more confidence about working in urban settings and a stronger intention to work in these contexts. It was also predicted that students would demonstrate a growth in their awareness of social justice issues as they progressed through a re-designed class. These predictions were tested via both survey and interview methods involving students in 9 re-designed courses during Fall 2009 and Spring 2010. In general, the initial quantitative analyses have supported our predictions. Students enrolled in re-designed classes demonstrated positive changes in urban teaching intentions and efficacy over time. Further, the qualitative analyses (using the interview data) mirrored these findings as most respondents communicated more confidence and openness in teaching in an urban setting over time. However, whereas these data revealed that student impressions of urban school improved over time (e.g., “They are safe to work in”), their views of urban communities (e.g., “They are unsafe to live in”) remained mostly negative and unchanged. Finally, when asked about the class experiences that had the greatest impact on student intellectual growth, many students (about 60%) indicated that instructor knowledge and competency regarding urban education, more so than course activities, had the greatest influence.

Although we will subject the interview data to more intensive coding efforts, the initial analysis suggests that these re-designed courses have a facilitative impact on improving the attitudes and expectancies of teacher candidates as to the realities of working in urban schools. Whereas the study results are very encouraging, we were somewhat disappointed that the students’ perceptions of urban communities did not improve much over time when compared to their impressions of urban schools. These data are informative though, as instructors could be encouraged to recast their course content and activities (e.g., conduct field trips that include both school observations and community tours) to better showcase the strengths of urban communities and how these assets can be used to improve urban schools.

¹Note: Co-authors are in alphabetical order