© 2010 INASED

Majority Teachers' Perceptions of Urban Adolescents and Their Abilities: Probes from Self-Reflection and Teacher Autobiographies

Immaculée Harushimana*
Lehman College, CUNY

Abstract
This article presents a small scale, qualitative study of nine majority alternate-route teachers and the perceptions they hold about themselves as urban educators and their urban students' academic abilities. Data for this study was collected through self-reflective, written interviews and meta-reflective responses to two published teacher autobiographies. Culture shock theory was used to understand the evolution of the participants' perceptions through the responses they provided. The study's findings revealed that the participants underwent positive changes in their perceptions of themselves as urban educators and of their urban students' academic abilities. Implications highlight the value of using published teacher autobiographies in urban teacher education.

Keywords: alternate-route teachers, autobiography, in-service teachers, majority teachers, pre-service teachers, urban adolescents, teacher perception, teacher education

* Immaculée Harushimana is assistant professor of Middle and High School Education at Lehman College, CUNY

© 2010 INASED

Introduction

Education, recruitment, and retention of multiculturally-aware educators have been, and continue to be, a major preoccupation of multicultural education advocates in the US (Goodwin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Sleeter, 2001). The unabated criticism made about teacher education programs is that they do not attract pre-service teachers of color and do little to prepare teaching candidates from the dominant white ethnic majority to work effectively with urban student populations (Goodwin, 2002). Given the persistent teacher shortage in urban schools, the need to recruit and train teacher candidates who understand the needs of urban adolescents and can relate to them is significant (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). This study seeks to achieve an understanding of the changing perceptions of nine "majority[1]" alternate-route certification teachers in regard to urban students' literacy abilities, through to biographic interviews and their meta-reflective responses to two published teacher autobiographies. As a case study of nine educators, the findings of the study are not intended to be generalized at a larger scale. However, the study can serve as a preliminary basis for a more comprehensive research on the use of self-reflections and teacher autobiographies to promote culturally responsive teaching. Teacher educators may benefit from the study's implications, which focus on the role of teacher autobiographies in the shaping of majority teachers' self-perceptions as educators of urban adolescents and of the opinions they form about their students' abilities.

The Problem

Presently, the severe teacher attrition in urban schools has pushed teacher recruitment efforts beyond state borders, populating urban schools and teacher education programs with novice teachers who often come from remote states in rural America. These new recruits, many of whom are career changers, are placed in high needs urban schools while pursuing a Master's in Teaching degree through alternative-route-to-certification programs (i.e., programs that permit candidates who already hold bachelor's degrees to become teachers without the burden of having to finish a traditional education program) (Ng, 2003). In some instances, little consideration is given to the fact that these recruits may have been immersed in a Eurocentric system of education (Ramsey, 2004) and, therefore, may lack essential understandings of and sensitivities about culturally- and racially-different individuals (Sleeter, 1994), who might most likely populate their classrooms.

The racial/cultural contrast between the student and the teacher populations in urban schools leads to the need for teacher education programs to rethink their curricula so deeply ingrained in a Eurocentric tradition (Goodwin, 2002) through emphasis on liberal arts and academic content. While content knowledge plays a key role in a teacher's success, the mutual teacher-student relationship is also indispensable. The cultural mismatch between urban students' cultures and

[1] In this study's context, the term "majority teacher" conveys the same meaning as Parker and Hood (1995) gave to "majority faculty" in their study of minority students and majority faculty and administrators in teacher education. Throughout this study, the term refers to teachers of 'white Caucasian' ethnicity. Occasionally, however, the term "white" is used especially in verbatim quotes or paraphrases to respect the original author's thought and intent.

© 2010 INASED

"majority," pre- and in-service teachers' cultures and beliefs has a significant impact on the educational outcomes for minority students of color (Sleeter, 2001). Studies of pre- and in-service teachers' changing perceptions (like this one) of urban schools may, therefore, contribute important insights into the teaching and learning climate, on the one hand, and the prediction and prevention of teacher attrition in urban public schools, on the other. The extent to which new teachers' perceptions change for the better or the worse may be a predictor of whether they will or will not stay in the new position. This study constitutes a modest contribution to the emerging scholarship on the state of alternate route certification programs in urban education, by focusing on "majority" pre- and in-service teachers' changing perceptions of themselves as urban educators and of the academic abilities of their urban students.

Historically, pre-service teacher education programs are known for recruiting primarily young, white, middle-class females, far removed from the reality of the urban students they may be called to teach (Goodwin, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). In most cases, these "majority" in-service teachers (as they are called in this study) of urban students end up quitting before they reach five years in the profession (Tettegah, 2006), mostly due to lack of preparation as to how to work with urban student populations. To address this problem, different solutions have been proposed, including the introduction of multicultural education courses, the socialization of pre-service teachers in urban school settings, and the implementation of alternative route teacher certification programs (Haberman & Post, 1998; Neuman, 1994, Ng, 2003). Alternative-route certification candidates constitute the main focus of this study, due to their increasing presence in urban schools as well as the fact that the majority of the recruits come from the dominant "majority" society.

Alternative-route teaching certification candidates (i.e., many of whom are also career changers) face a double challenge: firstly as people who did not undergo traditional teacher education; and secondly, as people who are transitioning into the teaching profession from other career paths. According to some researchers' speculations, teachers entering the profession through alternative route certification programs may leave in even greater numbers than their regularly certified counterparts due to "less preparation for dealing with demands and realities of the public schools, less formal training in teaching prior to entering the classroom and a greater likelihood of being placed in teaching situations that are more difficult" (Croasmun et al., 1997, n.p.). That is not to contradict research that says that there are alternate-route certification teachers who last longer, beyond the two-year teaching commitment in high needs urban schools (Kane, 2006). Efforts to close teacher attrition through alternative teacher recruitment need the concurrence of educational researchers in identifying new teacher recruits' perceptions of their experience and the role that such perceptions play in their decision to either persevere or quit.

Background Studies and Theoretical Underpinnings

More recently, studies that have focused on pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban students have reported mixed results. Some studies have observed positive changes in the candidates' perceptions of teaching in urban schools as a result of doing fieldwork in culturally-diverse schools (Conaway et al., 2007; Groulx, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mason, 1999). Other studies, on the contrary, have found out that the teachers' initial attitudes, biases, and perceptions of

© 2010 INASED

ethnically-different students were reinforced rather than reconstructed as a result of multicultural awareness (Haberman & Post, 1992; Smith & Smith, 2007; Spooner-Layne et al., 2007).

Culture Shock

Although racial identity development theory has served as the major framework for understanding teachers' attitudes and beliefs about students from a different race and culture than their own (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Cross et al., 1991; Tatum, 1992), other theories may be needed to help understand how these attitudes change across time and space. Some educational researchers have used the culture shock theory as a framework for understanding new teachers' changing perceptions of self, urban school culture, and urban students' personalities (Kron & Faber, 1973; McClean, 2006; Spooner-Lane et al., 2007). In many respects, alternative-teacher certification candidates are likely to undergo culture shock, like any person who enters a new culture for the first time. In racially diverse settings, racial biases and social prejudices may play a catalytic role in teachers' culture shock progression, especially when they are dealing with students from a different background than their own (Kron & Faber, 1973). According to Kalervo Oberg (1960), culture shock is solved in four phases: the honeymoon phase (also known as Euphoria), the rejection phase (also known as the crisis stage), the regression phase (known as early recovery, in positive cases), and the (full) recovery phase, which is achieved when affected individuals "begin to recognize and interpret subtle social cues, adapt, and eventually become bicultural as they accept and appreciate the unique qualities of a new culture" (McClean, 2006, n.p.). Majority teachers may be said to have achieved this stage once they outgrow their negative perceptions and learn to see the positive side of urban students:

Assumptions

A review of multicultural education research on teacher education provides important information on in-service and pre-service "majority" teachers' beliefs concerning educating urban children, especially minority students of color. The following assumptions reflect researchers' inferences about some of the dispositions that these teachers hold towards themselves and the students.

- Pre-service majority student teachers are fairly naïve and have stereotypical beliefs about urban children, such as believing that urban children bring attitudes that interfere with education (Sleeter, 2001, p. 95);

- Majority pre- and in-service educators may perceive themselves as having led a fairly privileged life, with a father who worked and a mother who stayed home and took care of the children (Ramsey, 2004);

- Many majority pre-service and in-service teachers are ambivalent about their ability to teach African-American children (Sleeter, 2001);

- Some majority pre- and in-service teachers claim to have grown up in households where education was valued and parents supported involvement in extra-curricular activities ranging from sports to music (Ramsey, 2004);

- Many teachers joining the profession, in addition to being predominantly "majority," female, monolingual, and middle class, exhibit parochial attitudes and articulate a preference for teaching children like themselves in environments with which they are familiar (Goodwin, 2002); and

- "Majority" teachers often deny racial issues and differences all together, or they cast all of their students of color as "immigrants" (Ng, 2003).

What transpires in the above assertions is the likelihood that majority teacher candidates come from a different racial and cultural background than most urban students. As a result, multicultural education advocates believe that it is critical for these teachers to become sensitized to the cultural experiences of urban youth, which influence their approach to literacy and learning. Delpit (1987) argues that minority people of color are likely to hold non-monolithic perceptions of education, as their social position is determined by the racial, political, and historical contexts in which they live.

The Study

A small-scale qualitative study was conducted on nine in-service and pre-service teaching fellows purposefully selected (see below for details) from a cohort of twenty teaching fellows who were enrolled in an education course in summer 2008. Interviews and reader-response prompts to teacher autobiographies were used to investigate the perceptions that the "majority" teacher candidates – both in- and pre-service – being trained to work in urban secondary schools have of urban students and their academic abilities. Given the small sample of participants and the qualitative nature of the study, the findings are by no means intended to be generalized on all majority alternate-route certification candidates. Rather, the study makes a modest contribution to the critical debate concerning the recruitment, training and retention of teachers in high need urban school settings.

Research questions

The study focuses on four major questions seeking to understand the evolution of majority pre-service and in-service teacher candidates newly recruited to serve urban adolescents:

1. What prior knowledge shapes "majority" pre-service and in-service teacher candidates' perceptions of urban students and their abilities?

2. How do in-service and pre-service majority teachers respond to the educational and teaching experiences of reflective urban educators from various ethnic backgrounds?

3. How receptive are in-service and pre-service majority teachers to the teaching philosophies that experienced teachers from across cultures have constructed for understanding and engaging urban youths?

4. To what extent do in-service and pre-service majority teachers recognize the importance of the use of autobiography as a tool to identify their own inherent biases?

© 2010 INASED

Participants

In accordance with the qualitative paradigm guidelines, the participants were purposefully selected for this study; purposeful sampling selects information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Criterion sampling (i.e. based on researcher-set criteria and restricted only to cases that meet the criteria) was applied to a cohort of alternative-route teacher certification candidates enrolled in a graduate teacher education program at a graduate urban institution in summer 2008. Consistent with the aim of the study, participant selection was limited to individuals who described themselves as members of the majority social group and alternative-route certification candidates, who were either undergoing pre-teaching training or were in their first year of teaching at an urban middle or high school. Of the 10 participants who met the above criteria, nine participants comprised of 4 men and 5 women completed the study. In age, the men ranged from early 30's to mid 50's, whereas the women ranged from mid 20's to late 50's. Biographic data also indicated that all the nine-participants were native citizens of the United States and grew up either in rural towns, in the Mid-West, or in the suburbs of New York State. In terms of career history, the data indicated that the participants came from various professions, including: beauty/cosmetics, staff recruiting agency, freelance news writing, dancing/choreography, music, accounting, and private tutoring. One participant indicated that she came straight from college, whereas another specified that she had held "no real" job before.

Study Design and Methodology

Design

In conformity with naturalistic inquiry guidelines (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and qualitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Okely & Callaway, 1992; Van Manen, 1990), this study examines: 1. participants' biographic interviews, and 2. their responses to two published teacher autobiographies, to gain an understanding of perceptions that pre-service and in-service "majority" teachers' perceptions have of urban students as well as of themselves as urban educators. Special attention is paid to the evolution of the teachers' perceptions of students' literacy abilities and the influence that these perceptions have on teachers' setting of expectations for their students.

While the use of autobiography as a research method in *urban* teacher education contexts is not as expanded (Ladson-Billings, 2000), its role in reflective pedagogy cannot be denied. The use of autobiography in teacher education has attracted the attention of a few educational scholars, like Burdell & Swadener (1999); Florio-Ruane & deTar (2001); and Schmidt (1999). Autobiographic testimonies of urban teachers are needed to enhance teacher training, recruitment, and retention of faculty in urban schools (Ng, 2003; Steinberg et al., 2004). Exploring the lives of racially diverse teachers "through reading and examining memoirs and autobiographies – [may] generate discussions about complex, multi-layered topics" (Calvillo, 2003, p. 51) that pertain to education, such as the connection between poverty, race, intelligence, and school performance.

The choice of the two autobiographies used in this study was consistent with

© 2010 INASED

the multicultural focus of this study in more than one way. First, the selected self-narratives represented points of view of both a "majority" educator and a minority educator of color. Second, the narratives reflected the teachers' experiences working with culturally-diverse student populations. To this end, *Autobiography of a Teacher* (Ramsey, 2004), one of the two autobiographic texts selected for this study is a reflective autobiography of a "majority" teacher, Sarah Ramsey, and her commitment to educating herself about cultural diversity. The other text, Leroy Lovelace, is a first-person autobiographic interview account of Leroy Lovelace, a "minority" educator, and his experience teaching in two racially and socio-economically different educational settings. Lovelace's story was published in Michele Foster (1997).

In her autobiography, Sarah Ramsey describes her journey of transformation from the rural, privileged life of a white girl living in a two-parent household, to her pre- and in-service teaching experience in multicultural school settings, where, on two separate occasions, she was a victim of a crime. The author credits these two incidents with being the reason why she decided to research and get more educated about multicultural issues in her doctoral work. Like Ramsey, Leroy Lovelace, who is African American, relates his journey of transformation in his understanding of race and schooling. Lovelace's self-discovery journey started early when he attended private institutions both at the high school and college levels. Upon graduation, he became a teacher at Wendell Phillips High School in downtown Chicago, and later was selected to teach talented children in the Maine Summer Humanities Program. Lovelace recounts how the Maine experience helped him appreciate his work with urban students at Phillips, where he is known for his "caring, demanding classroom style [which] has helped keep countless kids in school and pushed many further than they thought they could ever go" (Monroe, 1992, n.p.).

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study was collected qualitatively through semi-structured written interviews and meta-reflective narratives. Preliminary interviews focused on the participants' classroom experiences, as teachers, and were conducted prior to the reading of autobiographies.

Semi-structured, written interviews were completed by the participants both before and after reading the selected teacher autobiographies. For comparison purposes, exit interviews were conducted in the form of reader responses to the autobiographies at the end of the course. During the preliminary interviews, the participants were asked to share their: 1) expectations of urban youths' literacy abilities prior to becoming teachers; 2) impressions of urban youths' literacy abilities during their early days in the classroom, as pre-service (PSTp[2]) or in-service teacher (ISTp); and 3) assessment of urban youth's literacy abilities after the first two marking periods, which extended over 91 days.

Participating teachers' meta-reflective narratives (i.e., reflections on self-reflective narratives) provided data on the impact that reading and reflecting on the

[2] To preserve participants' anonymity, the acronyms ISTp and PSTp will be used throughout the study analysis to represent *In-Service Teacher participant* (ISTp) and *Pre-Service Teacher participant* (PSTp)

© 2010 INASED

two targeted teachers' autobiographies had had on their perceptions of their students' academic abilities.

The participants were invited to take part in a reader-response task, in which they were asked to read and respond to the two autobiographical narratives described earlier. Five response prompts were provided; they focused on: the reader's opinion about the author's account of his/her educational and literacy experiences; the educational insights gained from reading the selected autobiography; the participants' response to the author's interpretation of urban students' literacy abilities; their opinion of the author's understanding of the culture and lifestyle of urban minorities of color; and their personal assessment of the impact that reading these teacher autobiographies had on their self-perceptions as a teachers of urban youth.

Analysis

The data analysis followed qualitative research guidelines (Wolcott, 2001). Written interviews were analyzed separately from the meta-reflective narrative responses. After fitting the topics into the appropriate categories, the data inside each category was sorted out and assigned into subcategories. A close analysis of participants' prior and current expectations of students' literacy abilities helped to identify recurring patterns in their changing perceptions. Through pattern coding and thematic analysis of meta-reflective responses to the autobiographies, there emerged key areas that majority teachers need to adjust in order to understand urban students.

Findings

The participants' responses to the above prompts demonstrated an evolution, comparable to the culture shock trajectory, in the "majority" teachers' perceptions of their educator role as well as of the literacy abilities of urban students of color. The ecstatic feelings of landing a new/full time job were soon replaced by a crisis – a shock -- caused by a disappointing classroom reality. To manage the crisis, the teachers at first regressed to their own experiences to understand the situation at hand. Gradually, through guided reflections on the new experience, the participants showed signs of recovery from the shock slowly transitioning to an understanding of the students' aptitudes and attitudes towards learning.

Euphoria

The biographic data reflected a level of early excitement and anticipation – Euphoria – from the participants. As career changers, they looked forward to a positive departure from their previous occupations, as beauticians, recruiting agents, freelance writers, performing artists, accountants, musicians, private tutors, etc. Perhaps they saw teaching as a remedy to what was going wrong with the jobs they had chosen to leave behind. Apparently, however, this honeymoon stage was short-lived. The first contact with the students put them in a state of shock and dismay.

The Crisis

The participants' biographic testimonies reveal feelings of loss and disbelief regarding the students' attitudes and abilities upon first interaction with them. At this

© 2010 INASED

stage, which can be likened to the "crisis" stage of culture shock, in-service teacher participants reported feelings of frustration with the students, and they blamed different entities – the system, the community, the students, or themselves -- for the situation. Examples of early commentaries follow:

> ISTp1: They [urban students] have limited mastery of the English language and no sophisticated way of expressing their feelings[. . .]. They see the skills that I attempt to teach them as hurdles that I place before them, and [. . .] they knock them aside without regard for the intrinsic value in the knowledge that I am trying to givethem;
>
> ISTP 3: My students don't feel as though school is really important. They know the game. They show up, do below the bare minimum, fail at least one of their classes, pull off a 2 on the state test and voila, they're in the next grade. And the New York City Board of Education accepts that. That is what terrifies me. And sometimes I'm not sure how to deal with these students who seem to lack all motivation. This, too, terrifies me;
>
> ISTp3: Many of my students use inappropriate language and behavior in the classroom or in a public setting, and are often unaware or uncaring of this. It's an issue that I am very sensitive to [. . .]; and
>
> ISTp4: [. . .] a lot of them didn't have the self esteem to even try. It took me almost the entire year to realize that this was the reason they were failing. They considered themselves failures before they even began.

Perhaps, an important catalyst of the above commentaries is the influence of the teachers' own beliefs, which are rooted into a deep cultural discontinuity between non-urban majority teachers' and urban minority students' lives, class, and race, as some of them remarked.

When asked to comment on students' abilities, more than half of the participants expressed a state of disbelief through the use such emotional qualifiers as "appalled," "shocked," or "surprised" to express their indignation at the students' extremely low-literacy performance. Some found the range of abilities among students surprising, while others were appalled by the lack of appropriate reading materials for the students' levels. Examples of early commentaries include:

> ISTp1: I was shocked at how violently students were opposed to literacy;
>
> ISTp3: I was surprised at the range of ability. Many performed even farther below than I imagined;
>
> ISTP 4: I was still surprised at how my seventh graders struggled with reading. Some read well, but many did not even know the basics of grammar;
>
> ISTp7: Initially I was appalled by the number of children's books stocked in the libraries of my school's classrooms; and

© 2010 INASED

IST8: I was shocked at what I was confronted with. When asked to write a paragraph, they wrote a sentence. Their topic sentences mostly began with "I think". They struggled with the Basal Reader as the vocabulary was sophisticated.

In the above responses the respondents used the reality of the classroom to validate their early beliefs about the students. Each response points to something wrong either about the students' attitudes towards literacy or their literacy aptitudes. Some teachers denounced the students' defiant attitude; others found their low reading levels abnormal. Some form of intervention was necessary to pull these teachers out of their negative state of mind and place them on the path to recovery

Early recovery

Depending on whether there is adequate support system to facilitate new teacher socialization, the regression stage may either lead to abdication or recovery. The teachers in this study experienced the latter. Reflections through biographic interviews and reader responses over their new role and context opened them to the possibility of self awareness.

As a sign of "early recovery", some in-service teacher participants confessed that it was difficult to look past their early beliefs to understand their students and where they came from. By the time of this study, in-service teachers had had the opportunity to spend more time with the students while also taking education courses. Based on the written responses, around 67% (6 out of 9) of the participants indicated that they started off with very low expectations of the students' cognitive abilities. Some confessed to not thinking highly of their students, like in the following statements:

ISTp2: From the readings and conversations, I expected low abilities;

ISTp4: I knew many students would be performing below grade level;

PSTp5: I had limited expectations based on my own [personal] experience; and

PSTp9: I expected urban youths to be performing below grade level due to the scores received on the ELA and Math City exams for middle school published by the DOE[3] and media reports.

For thirty-three percent of the participants (3 out of 9), however, the classroom reality reversed their rather optimistic expectations, as illustrated below;

ISTp3: I expected their ability to be equal to anybody's;

ISTp1: My expectations were about realistic; and

[3] New York City teachers use DOE as the short form for NYC Department of Education

© 2010 INASED

IST8: I thought they'd at least be able to write a paragraph.

The recovery process for these teachers coincided with the beginning of the graduate course described earlier, which afforded them the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their early teaching experiences throughout the course and connect them to the autobiographic experiences related in the two teacher autobiographies. Progress in recovery was perceived in their responses to the "current impressions" prompt.

Progressing recovery

The participants' responses to the "current impressions" prompts indicated that, while not too high, their expectations had improved from their earlier teaching experiences to the time of the interviews. Some responses reflected a degree of understanding of their students and a commitment to be part of the solution to help them succeed. The following reflections reflect more understanding than criticism:

ISTp1: They read far below grade level, but don't mind when it is comfortable and meets their ability. They like to be successful.

ISTp3: The ability is there. What lacks is confidence and motivation. I feel like many of my students are doomed unless they get motivated.

ISTp7: Motivation rather than skill is the main detriment to their ability to learn.

PSTp 6: Higher enrolments; financial conditions, and parent education/involvement present a challenge toward achievement of student goals.

ISTp8: I know that they are incredibly literate in poetry, media, body language and I use these in a structured form to get the desired result of a structured piece of writing (essay, research paper).

Comparatively, there seems to be a noticeable change in the participants' pre-conceptions of students' abilities and their evolving re-evaluations of the latter. Gradually, the perceptions are shifting from stereotyping to acknowledgement of potential. The changing impressions have been summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: *Teachers' Changing Impressions about Urban Students*

Before Becoming Teachers	Early in the Teaching Profession	Later in the first year
Low expectations	Range of abilities	Potential to do well
Limited expectations	Oppositional attitudes	Creative ability
Minimum expectations	Struggling learners	Lack of motivation
Realistic	Below-grade-level materials	Lack of support

Full recovery

The equivalent of "full recovery" in the culture shock trajectory was reached towards the end of the course, when the participants partook in reading, reflecting and relating to Ramsey and Lovelace's teacher autobiographies. The responses to the autobiographies reflected a major shift in the participants' perceptions of urban students, indicating an equal amount of admiration for both Ramsey and Lovelace.

The participants' responses suggested that they had learned valuable lessons from both autobiographies, which represented respectively views of a majority and a minority educator. As a result of reading the autobiographies, the participants concurred on three problem areas that needed urgent focus during their new teacher journeys. Three themes representing the participants' new perceptions of teaching urban students revolved around the need: 1) to examine oneself in relation to inherent racist beliefs; 2) to develop an understanding and knowledge of the students; and 3) to find a connection with students and set high expectations for them.

Transcending race and finding ways to develop an understanding of students' culture. In relation to Ramsey's story, her testimony helped the participants realize that to be successful, as majority teachers of urban student populations, they needed to reflect on whether they themselves hold racist beliefs and, if so, seek ways to break away from these beliefs and minimize cultural biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. As majority educators who have little experience with cultural diversity, most participants reported that they identified with Ramsey's urban encounters:

ISTp2: I could definitely relate to this author. As I noted while discussing one of the other authors, all of my experience was in suburban schools, and I was put into an urban teaching environment, where many of my techniques just wouldn't work.

© 2010 INASED

PSTp5: The first sentence of Ramsey's autobiography speaks volumes in itself: "Many of us do not realize the prejudices we learn by living our lives." This, I believe, is the common thread between Ramsey's experience and everyone else's, however they may differ.

ISTp6: This represents a "classic journey" of a privileged professional. I related to the author in so many ways, educationally and in the lack of diversity that handicapped her.

The fact that the respondents recognized themselves in Ramsey's story may have contributed to their admiration for the author's decision to learn about African American culture as a way to challenge her own beliefs. Thus, they wrote:

ISTp1: I like that Ramsey, instead of developing racist beliefs, took a class in African American studies to learn about *them*. She recognized that fear stems from the unknown and did her best to gain an understanding of African Americans. It is a very noble goal;

PSTp5: For while I am a white female who has interrogated her own cultural identity, perhaps I have not done it comparatively to others and their identities. This seems like someone who knows the lit, interesting…;

PSTp5: Through reflection we can understand who we are, why we are that way, and how we change everyone else's however they may differ; and

ISTp6: I can also relate to coming into an urban setting after being raised in a rural setting and having the same expectations. Although it is a culture shock, a teacher can't let their expectations slip because of their surroundings.

Unlike Ramsey's story, the cultural experiences and testimonies of Lovelace sometimes reflected a different worldview than the one held by the participants. Nevertheless, through transparency and professional integrity, Lovelace managed to convince these pre- and in-service teachers that good teaching has little to do with race; rather, it is fulfilled through setting high expectations for all students, demonstrating knowledge and finding a connection with the students.

Setting high standards for urban students. From the participants' responses to Lovelace's story, there emerged recognition of the value of a pedagogy that sought to cultivate human integrity and set high standards for all students. Apparently, one of the reasons why Lovelace received a remarkably high and detailed number of responses (80% or 7 out of 9 possible responses) was his uniform approach to teaching, regardless of students' racial or economic background. Lovelace's integrity led the participants to examine their own attitude towards urban students, like in the following reflections:

© 2010 INASED

ISTp1: Mr. Lovelace has shown the value of his personal integrity. I often wonder, as a teacher of urban students, if there'll ever be common ground for ALL students [emphasis, not mine]. I also believe that without, at least acknowledging our biases, we will not effectively master the urban setting;

ISTp2: Mr. Lovelace is one of the exceptional teachers in the world. If there were more people like him everyone would be better off. Students would succeed more often, and teachers would find that their expectations were met. I think that we all need to unite together to uphold the standards that will help out students to be successful.

Developing high expectations for urban students and challenging students to meet them. Through Mr. Lovelace's testimony, the participants realized that a teacher may gain more respect through commitment to challenging urban students' oppositional attitudes toward learning and holding them accountable, while ensuring that his instruction was engaging. He challenged them to not go with the illusive persona that some students display to get away with the crime of laziness. It is encouraging to see that the participants seem to get and go with Lovelace's message, as reflected in these comments:

ISTp3: His [Lovelace] understanding of his students' needs and abilities seems to be right on target, but he also seems to have a firm grasp of what the students will try to get away with. I love that he understands this without making them seem troublesome. All students will reflect what you see in them and give it back to you;

ISTp4: I like how this teacher lays down a level of expectation and expects it to be followed. He also mentions how we can't let kids get away with pulling off the "feel sorry for me" trick;

PSTp5: I think this teacher was very connected to his students and their needs as students. He has a very inspirational story. His article makes me proud to be a teacher;

ISTp6: This is a wonderful, inspiring read. I appreciate the resolve that Lovelace had in his expectations for his students. And he was the same in his expectations whether teaching affluent students or the underprivileged. He enjoyed working hard because he loved to teach. As teachers, Lovelace's story clarifies . . . the ideal of engaging students to the degree that they value their own participation as part of the team; and

PSTp7: I really responded to Mr. Lovelace's ideas of involving and motivating all his students. He expressed what I think of as 'positive pride', and his intention was to instil this in his students, as well. That is a quality I would emulate.

Insights and meaning derived from reading and reflecting on Ramsey and Lovelace autobiographies show that the participants attained a deep level of self-awareness, social understanding, and personal responsibility. Table 2, below, summarizes the teachers' insights and meanings derived from the autobiographies in Table two.

Table 2. *Teaching insights and meanings derived from Ramsey and Lovelace autobiographies.*

In relation to Ramsey	In relation to Lovelace	In relation to selves
Expect cultural tensions	Know thy students	Expect challenges
Accept differences	Foster high expectations	Know thyself
Be prepared to adjust	Motivate the students	Reflect
Confront your fears	Find a connection with the learner	Seek growth

Discussion and Implications:
Teacher autobiography and novice teacher perceptions

Reading and responding to the selected autobiographies had a significant impact on the participants' self-perceptions as teachers. All the respondents appreciated Ramsey and Lovelace for their professional and deontological ethos. The responses reflected an overall appreciation for the educators, regardless of race or gender, for challenging the readers to get out of their comfort zones and be the agents for educational success in their classrooms. Reading about self reflective teachers not only sparked the participants to carry out self-examination; it also provided them with a new lens through which they could envision a new pedagogy of possibility. The following metareflections covey a heuristic tone:

> ISTp1: Reading through these autobiographies was very encouraging and enlightening. Reading these autobiographies helped me focus and realize that every teacher's experience is unique. They encouraged me to find my own "story" as an educator;

> ISTp2: It is validating to hear that some of the struggles the author faces are quite like my own. As a white teacher, it is especially interesting to hear what a black teacher has to say. Again, with respect to holding fast to rigorous standards, I think it is vitally important for all teachers to see that we must not fall victim to the

soft bigotry of low expectations! The next time I consider moving a due date, or cutting down a length requirement on a paper, I will. think of Mr Lovelace and pause for thought;

ISTp3: At times, I could definitely relate to the issues some teachers have faced. Additionally, I agree that it is crucial to establish your expectations with your students to inspire them to become active participants in their own learning;

ISTp4: I felt the autobiographical accounts to be revealing as to the shaping of the teachers as educators. I appreciate that these educators have made realizations about themselves through much reflection, which in turn helps us to illuminate our own experiences;

PSTp3: Since "Behind every face is a story," I am glad I have had the opportunity to grow in my ability to learn more about the cultural stories of my prospective future students; and

ISTp6: His [Lovelace] goal of full-class engagement reminds me of my best learning experiences and the teachers who really leave us with an indelible memory.

Ramsey and Lovelace's autobiographies successfully answered questions and addressed concerns that probably "majority" teachers might not ask publicly, for one reason or another. Availing a private space to read and respond to the autobiographies seems to have provided the teachers with an opportunity to confront their personal challenges and achieve growth in their understanding of urban students.

Methodologically, the participants' appreciation of the autobiographies validated the pedagogical potential of teacher autobiographies to inspire pre-service and in-service teacher candidates. The humanistic nature of Ramsey and Lovelace's autobiographies engaged the participating in-service teachers into pondering and confessing their (mis)perceptions of urban students. By and large, the responses to autobiographies revealed the participants' willingness and openness to learn from the experiences of inspirational teachers from across races and cultures. The participants' responses suggest that at least two important lessons were derived from the autobiographies. First, Ramsey's experience suggests that in order to better understand and communicate with people who are different, one must make an effort to learn about them. Second, Lovelace's experience suggests that in an atmosphere of integrity and mutual respect, accountability, and self-discipline are likely to lead students of all backgrounds to success. In other words, racial awareness is not necessarily the only means, nor is it always the best means to engage urban students.

Conclusions

Culture shock is a common phenomenon likely to happen whenever a person transitions from a familiar culture to a foreign cultural environment, including the classroom. Kron and Faber (1973) have rightly remarked that culture shock is likely to indiscriminately affect a white middle-class, suburban teachers, who transfer

to inner city school, but also to a black teacher who transfers from an inner-city school to a white, rural or suburban school. As mentioned earlier in the assumptions, racial minority scholars and advocates tend to be offended when "majority" teachers make negative comments about urban children. This study has demonstrated that these sorts of comments may indeed be part of the culture shock process, and that they can be overcome. Through self-reflective responses to biographic interviews and teacher autobiographies, pre-and in-service majority teachers can challenge and change the negative expectations they have about urban youth's literacy abilities and attitude towards learning.

The findings from the students' responses to the autobiographies corroborate findings from previous research on the role of teacher autobiography in the preparation of multiculturally aware teachers (Fernandez, 2003; Wang & Yu, 2006). The autobiography provides a humane venue through which educators who "have made realizations about themselves through much reflection, [. . .] in turn help us to illuminate our own experiences" (ISTp4). As suggested by the proponents of autobiographical narratives in education (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Gomez & Tabachnick, 1992; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Witherell & Noddings, 1991), this study supports the notion that self-reflection and dialogue illuminated by teacher autobiographies can enhance "majority" teachers' cultural sensitivity.

Further research is needed to test a tentative hypothesis generated from this study, namely the possibility that through self-reflections based on resilient teacher autobiographies, majority alternative-route teacher candidates might come to an understanding of urban students' literacy potential and of the concessions that need to take place in order to thrive in an urban school setting.

References

Burdell, P., & Swadener, B. (1999). Critical personal narrative and autoethnography in education: Reflections on a genre. *Educational Researcher, 28*, 21-26.

Carter, R. T., & Goodwin, L. A. (1994). Racial identity and education. *Review of Research in Education, 20*, 291-336.

Calvillo, C. (2003, fall). Memoir and autobiography: Pathways to examining the multicultural self. *Multicultural Education, 1*, 51-54.

Conaway, B. J., Browning, L. J., & Purdum-Cassidy, B. (2007). Teacher candidates' changing perceptions of urban schools: Results of a 4-year study. *Action in Teacher Education, 29*, 20-31.

Croasmun, J., Hampton, D., & Hermann, S. (1997). Teacher attrition: Is time running out? *Issues Challenging Education*. Retrieved, December 17, 2007, from http://horizon.unc.edu/projects/issues/papers/Hampton.asp

Cross, W. E., Jr., Parham, T. A., & Helms, J. E. (1991). The stages of black identity development: Nigrescence models. In R. Jones (Ed.), *Black psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 319-338). San Francisco: Cobb and Henry.

Delpit, L. D. (1987). Skills and other dilemmas of a progressive black educator. *Equity and Choice, 3*, 9-14.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. (2nd ed,). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Florio-Ruane, S., & deTar, J. (2001). *Teacher education and the cultural imaginatiom: Autobiography, conversation, and narrative*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fernandez, A. (2003). Autobiography in multicultural, anti-racist education. *Teaching and Learning, 18, 5-15.*

Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching*. New York: The New Press.

Genor, M., & Goodwin, A. L. (2005). Confronting ourselves: Using autobiographical analysis in teacher education. *The New Educator*, *1*, 311-331.

Gomez, M. L., and Tabachnick, B. R. (1992). Telling teaching stories. *Teaching Education*, *4*, 129-138

Goodwin, A. L. (2002). Teacher preparation and the education of immigrant children. *Education and Urban Society*, 34(2), 156-172.

Graham, R. J. (1991). *Reading and writing the self*. New York: Teachers College Press

Groulx, J. G. (2001). Changing preservice teacher perceptions of minority schools. *Urban Education, 36*, 60-92.

Haberman, M., & Rickards, W. H. (1990). Urban teachers who quit: Why they leave and what they do. *Urban Education, 25,* 297-304.

Haberman, M., & Post, L. (1992). Does direct experience change education students' perceptions of low income minority children? *Midwestern Educational Researcher, 5,* 28-31.

Haberman, M., & Post, L. (1998). Teachers for multicultural schools: The power of selection. *Theory into Practice 3,* 96–104.

Hampton, B., Peng, L., & Ann, J. (2008). *Pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban schools*. *Urban Review, 40*, 268-295.

Kane, T. J., Rockoff, E. J., & Staiger, D. O. (2006). What does certification tell us about teacher effectiveness? Evidence from New York City, *NBER Working Papers 12155*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.

Kron, K., & Faber, C. (1973, April). How does the teacher cope with the culture shock? The Clearing House, 47, 506-508.

Kirby, P. (1991). *Narrative and the self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 211 247

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African-American students. *Journal of Teacher Education,51*, 206-214.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2001). *Crossing over to Canaan: The journey of new teachers in diverse classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Larson, C. M. (2006, fall). Confessions of an 'awful' teacher: The impact of culture shock on teaching in low-performing schools. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*. Retrieved 21 May, 2009, from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4009/is_200610/ai_n17191886/

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. (1986). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mason, T. C. (1999). Prospective teachers' attitudes toward urban schools: Can they be changed? *Multicultural Education, 6*, 9-13.

Monroe, S. (1992, October). Breaking out, then and now. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved March 8, 2007, from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976618,00.html

Neumann, R. A. (1994). Reconsidering emergency teaching certificates and alternative certification programs as responses to teacher shortages. *Urban Education, 29,* 89-108.

Ng, J. C. (2003). Teacher shortages in urban schools: The role of traditional and alternative certification routes in filling the voids. *Education and Urban Society, 35*, 380-398.

Oberg, K., 1960. Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, *7*, 177–182.

Okely, J., & Callaway, H. (1992). Anthropology and autobiography: Participatory experience and embodied knowledge. In Judith Okely and Hellen Callaway (Eds.), *Anthropology and autobiography*. London: Routledge.

Parker, L, & Hood, S. (1995). Minority students v.1 majority faculty and administrators in teacher education: Perspectives on the class of cultures. *The Urban Review, 27*, 159-174.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Phillion, J. (2004). Using life-based narratives in multicultural teacher education. *Multicultural Perspectives, 6*, 3-9.

Ramsey, S. (2004). Autobiography of a teacher: A journey toward critical multiculturalism. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly, 2,* 45-53.

Schmidt, P. (1997). *Beginning in retrospect: writing and reading a teacher's life*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Sleeter, C. E. (1994). Resisting racial awareness: How teachers might understand the social order from their racial, gender, and social class locations. In *Inside/out: Contemporary critical perspectives in education.* Martusewicz, R. A., & Reynolds, W. M. (eds.), New York: St. Martin's Press. 239-264.

Sleeter, C. (2001, April). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education, 52, 94-106.*

Smith, D., & Smith, B. J. (2006). Perceptions of violence. The views of teachers who left urban schools. *The High School Journal* 89, 34-42

Spellman, S. O. (1988, July-August). Recruitment of minority teachers: Issues, problems, facts, possible solutions. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58-63.

Spooner-Lane, R. S., & Tangen, D.J., & Campbell, M. A. (2007). When your first year is your final year: Changing perceptions of practicum through NESB preservice teachers' eyes. In *Proceedings First Year Higher Education Conference*, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Steinberg, S., Kincheloe, J., & Shanley, D. (Eds.) (2004). *19 urban questions: Teaching in the city*. Studies in the postmodern theory of education. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Co.

Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: the application of racial identity development in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 62,* 1-24.

Tettegah, S. (1996, spring). The racial consciousness attitudes of white prospective teachers and their perceptions of the teachability of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds: Findings from a California study. *The Journal of Negro Education, 65*, 151-163.

Wallerstein, N. (1983). *Language and culture in conflict*. Addison-Wesley.

Wang, H, & Yu, T. (2006). Beyond promise: Autobiography and multicultural education. *Multicultural Education, 4*, 29-35.

© 2010 INASED

Witherell, C., & Noddings, N. (1991). Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (2001). *Writing up qualitative research*. (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario: SUNY Press.