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## Why have all the teachers gone: Co-inquiry of teacher and teacher educators

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# Why Have All the Teachers Gone

## Co-inquiry of teacher and teacher educators

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New teachers today enter the profession at a challenging time. Teaching is becoming more demanding intellectually, physically, emotionally, and politically (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Intrator, 2006; Korthagen, 2004). They need to know how students learn and how to teach successfully within various social, cultural, and linguistic contexts; manage a complex environment; and use technology (Darling-Hammond, 2006). “The new generation is entering teaching at a time when there are more expectations than ever about teacher performance, but also at a time when teaching has been broadly and publicly disrespected” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 8).

To further complicate their professional lives, many novice teachers begin teaching while completing teacher education programs (Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In other words, with limited competencies and experience in education, they take on two demanding roles: one as a graduate student, and the other as a teacher of diverse groups of children in urban, high-needs schools. How do these new teachers negotiate two institutions of learning, construct their understanding of university-based knowledge, and make it valuable for their teaching life? This inquiry attempts to explain this dual process for one new special educator enrolled in a New York City alternative certification program. Our purpose is twofold: to explore the meaning that one individual makes of the combined experiences of new teacher and graduate student, and to consider what teacher educators can learn from the perceptions of one novice teacher.

Many new teachers are placed in urban, high-needs schools where there are disproportionately higher turnover rates (Ingersoll, 2001). Teacher dissatisfaction resulting in very high attrition rates in urban schools has been attributed to low salaries, a lack of support from the administration, discipline problems, lack of student motivation, and lack of influence over decision making (Ingersoll, 2001). Many beginning teachers leave before they become skilled in their work. Almost one quarter of new teachers leaves after the first three years and 40 to 50 percent leave within five years (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006; Ingersoll,

2002). Attrition and migration to other schools is particularly an issue for teachers in special education (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

Though the picture painted of novice teachers who leave the profession early centers on their school lives, the day-to-day lives of many teachers today is more complex. Many start teaching while they are completing a master's degree in education. Their experience and the decisions they make to stay or leave the profession grow out of their reactions to both teaching and graduate work. Expanding on past investigations of novice teachers' school experience, this inquiry considers the interplay of a new teacher's roles as teacher and graduate student (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Flores, 2006).

To appreciate the circumstances of this group of new teachers, one needs to first understand the ways many are becoming teachers. One current source of new teachers is alternative certification teacher education programs. These programs can be found in almost every state and in many colleges and universities (Feistritzer, 2005 as cited in Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008). Because these graduate students begin teaching with little experience in the classroom or a knowledge base in education, many do not feel prepared to meet the demands of students, parents, and administrators as well as the local, state, and national standards that teachers are required to follow (Korthagen, 2007; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Further, some graduate programs espouse educational philosophies and approaches in sharp contrast to the traditional, test-driven curricula and teacher-directed instruction in most public schools today. Negotiating conflicting demands and perspectives from the schools and the university can be a daily struggle (Intrator, 2006; Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008).

In New York City, one alternative certification effort is the Teaching Fellows Program, where high achieving, recent college students and career changers become teachers at the same time that they are going through a master's program in education at a local university. Participants begin teaching after taking two courses at the university and teaching in a summer school program alongside an experienced teacher. The stated goal of the program is to "fill vacancies in New York City's lowest performing schools" (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007, p. 489). Since many of these new teachers are placed in what are called "low performing" schools, they have added pressures to improve student performance.

Prior research has investigated how well teacher education prepares graduate students to teach (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Zeichner, 2003). One study found that teachers felt more prepared in traditional programs than their counterparts who went through an alternative certification program (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). Some have criticized teacher education for not doing more to link teaching practice with educational research (Goodlad, 1991; Korthagen, 2007). Yet, some teacher education programs are successful in supporting teachers' demanding work in school (Kitchen, 2005a; Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003).

Some teacher educators have taken this spotlight on teaching and teacher education as an opportunity to study their classroom practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Dinkleman, 2003; Zeichner, 1999). The field of self-study has emerged to gain a better understanding of what kind of learning occurs in the university classroom and how teacher educators can learn from

researching their own practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran, 2005). After having taught novice teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs and participating in faculty inquiry groups for many years, we initiated this inquiry as part self-study. We were searching for a way to more fully understand new teachers' experience.

As teacher education attempts to bridge the divide between theory and practice and make graduate work more useful for new teachers . . . teachers could not only provide needed knowledge, but could take a more active role in examining their experience.

In addition, research about teaching typically is conducted with teachers serving as subjects. The interpretations of their experience are the sole domain of the researcher. Examining a teacher's work from a distance, as most researchers do, may not adequately show the parameters and depth of the participant's circumstances, challenges, and decisions. Certain issues underlying the work may be left uncovered due to the research design, the researcher's limited perceptions, and his/her biases and assumptions.

More fully listening to new teachers' stories may help avoid these research limitations and find ways to make teacher education more relevant. Though many graduate programs ask students to share their teaching experiences, few studies, to date, have had the teacher participate in the research as both participant and co-researcher (Espinosa, Bauso, Cleary, & Traugh, 2007). It seems logical that as teacher education attempts to bridge the divide between theory and practice and make graduate work more useful for new teachers, that teachers could not only provide needed knowledge, but could take a more active role in examining their experience (Lampert, 2000). Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) argue that the teacher and the teacher's knowledge of practice should be "central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading, and schooling" (p. 119).

To bring the novice teacher on board as equal research partner, two approaches have been invaluable in shaping the design of this inquiry. First, the work of teacher research has documented teachers doing inquiries into their practice. This gives voice and agency to those who inquire into their own work as teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). Others have continued this process of teacher as researcher to unravel the complexities and interrelations in different aspects of teaching that could not be revealed through more traditional methods (Lampert, 2000). Patricia Carini and the Prospect Center have provided teachers with a descriptive, holistic approach, based on phenomenology, to understand students and their work and the teacher's own teaching practice (Carini & Himley, 2009; Himley & Carini, 2000).

Collaborative Inquiry, the second influence, contends that certain experiences cannot be adequately understood by taking an outside perspective as researcher. "One must be authentically inside to properly explore and understand it" (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000, p. 4). This collaborative method involves both reflection and action with the shared goal of "constructing valid knowledge" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 6). The participant, in this case a teacher, should have voice and agency into his or her experience, knowing about herself or himself in

ways that a teacher educator cannot. The contributions of the participant turned equal partner reveal findings that are authentic understandings of one person's experience.

This study focused on one teacher's experience and in so doing, attempted to uncover the intricate web of her perceptions of her educational history, beliefs, teaching, and graduate experience. Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) found "teacher development in alternative certification to be a function of the interaction between the program as implemented, the school context in which participants are placed, and the participants' backgrounds and previous teaching experiences" (p. 483). This inquiry, then, was developed to determine how the active voice of a novice teacher could reveal a substantive picture of her experience, and at the same time, educate teacher educators. The revelations about one teacher's story contributes to a body of literature on the complex nature of teaching in today's urban, high-needs schools with the demands of high-stakes testing and educational certification as part of the background for new teachers.

### **Method**

This qualitative study is based on the philosophy of phenomenology where the goal is to make meaning of human experience, in this case, one teacher's graduate work and teaching (Van Manen, 1995). Unlike much research that creates "partial truths" about participants who are not part of the research team (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), our study utilizes collaborative, practitioner inquiry that includes the participant as co-researcher throughout the process. Laurie and Jessica, teacher educators, worked collaboratively with Lauren, a former graduate student and new teacher. Lauren's course writing and interview responses served as the foundation for studying the connections she made between her graduate work and her teaching experience. At the end of the project, we reflected on the impact the inquiry had on our thinking and teaching with the purpose of providing preliminary understandings of the possible meanings of Lauren's story for teacher education.

Lauren's particular reactions to teaching in an urban school and to the master's program in which she was enrolled are unique to her. The study does not make generalizations from her story. It is a description of how a teacher and teacher educators worked together as researchers to illuminate Lauren's story and to inform Jessica and Laurie's work as teacher educators.

### **Research Team**

**Participant-Researcher.** Lauren started her graduate education in Childhood Special Education at a large, urban private university through the New York City Teaching Fellows Program. In the summer of 2004, Lauren was enrolled in two graduate courses and placed in an elementary school classroom. In September, she began to teach in her own classroom. She completed the master's degree program two years later and spent one more year teaching at the same elementary school. She was the special educator working collaboratively with a general education teacher, two years in a first grade class and one in a combined kindergarten and first grade.

**Teacher Educator-Researcher.** Laurie has taught education students at this University in the areas of Special Education, Human Development, and Descriptive Inquiry for many years. More

recently, in working with students in the city's alternative certification program, she discovered that many well educated, competent and empathic graduate students were leaving the teaching profession soon after completing the master's program. This project is an outgrowth of that realization and her desire to learn about their school and graduate experiences to more deeply understand their career decisions. Laurie taught Lauren in the human development course, *Lives of Children*, in Lauren's first year at the University.

Teacher Educator-Researcher. Jessica, as the Director of Field Experiences and School Relations at the University, has had much school-based experience with new and student teachers. She, too, has become acutely aware of their struggles and is concerned that the University's teacher education programs may not be adequately meeting their needs. Jessica taught Lauren in *Classroom Inquiry I*, where Lauren wrote a Descriptive Review of a Child, and *Classroom Inquiry II*.

### **Description of the Graduate Program**

Lauren's graduate program in Childhood Special Education stresses Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry as an approach to coming to know children and adolescents, teaching, and schools. The central idea is that each child and adolescent is unique and needs to be understood through his/her strengths, interests, and modes of thinking and learning. The relationship with each child or adolescent is at the core of teaching practice. Observation and description are the modes of research that lead the teacher to know the complexity of his/her students and that knowledge guides curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. The descriptive processes taught in the courses, *Classroom Inquiry I and II*, are designed to give teachers an opportunity to re-conceptualize their vision of their students and themselves (Himley & Carini, 2000).

Lauren's graduate program reflects the values of the School of Education that emphasize the qualities of knowledge, enquiry, empathy, pluralism, and social commitment (KEEPS). In the Special Education courses, particular attention is given to exploring the meaning of student differences and to developing competencies for working with students with identified disabilities in inclusive settings.

What follows are descriptions of certain courses in the graduate program. The courses were selected because their writing assignments revealed Lauren's thoughts about her school or academic experience and will be referred to later in the article.

Lauren's first course, *Issues in Urban Education*, focuses on the role of schooling in the lives of children, families, and communities. It is designed to help teachers understand the cultural context of working in an urban community. The course introduces the social, political, and economic forces at play on the educational system in urban environments.

In the course, *Lives of Children*, students are introduced to developmental and non-developmental theories for understanding children's experience. In the major assignment, the Child Study, they observe one student and use a deductive process of applying developmental concepts to explain that child's development.

The process of collaborative practitioner research includes the voices of both teacher educators and a teacher, and creates an opportunity for researchers to be “inside” and “outside” the experience.

In *Classroom Inquiry I*, students are exposed to a phenomenological perspective on understanding children based on the work of the Prospect Center, where theory emerges from perceptions of the particular child. Different from the child development course, the notion of theory is inductive. Teachers spend the semester looking closely at one child or adolescent, writing a Descriptive Review of a Child/Adolescent, and sharing thoughts about the process. They are asked to describe the

student through the lens of his/her strengths, rather than developmental theory. The process of observing and taking descriptive notes from a non-judgmental, phenomenological stance is meant to focus the teacher on the variety of behaviors and interactions the child or adolescent has in a day at school, rather than focusing on what is already assumed about the student.

In *Classroom Inquiry II*, students use what they have learned about phenomenological methods in *Classroom Inquiry I* to do a research study about their classroom practice. They choose a question that guides an inquiry into their teaching practice and collect data within their classroom that allows them to explore their evolving understandings of their question. They conclude their project with a reflection on their work called “What I Have Learned.”

In *Final Inquiry*, students conduct a literature review concerning their inquiry question. Reading the research and opinions of other teachers and university researchers illuminates their own data and conclusions. Students also write a “KEEPS Letter,” a reflective review of their work in the program and a demonstration of how they have met the objectives of their graduate program. Throughout this letter, students refer to particular writing assignments and how they demonstrate each specific objective of the graduate program.

## Design

The process of collaborative practitioner research includes the voices of both teacher educators and a teacher, and creates an opportunity for researchers to be “inside” and “outside” the experience. Yorks (2005) describes practitioner-based collaborative action inquiry as “a process directed toward creating social space for generative learning: learning that is necessary for transformational changes in practice” (p. 1220). The process of reviewing and analyzing data was influenced by the concept Yorks refers to as *Ba*, a space for knowledge creation. Not necessarily a physical space, *Ba* focuses on interaction and sharing of knowledge (Yorks, 2005). This work is based on the model of cooperative inquiry developed by John Heron (1996) who wrote, “Certain aspects of the human experience cannot be understood by conducting experiments and collecting data from other people. Rather, one must be authentically inside the experience to properly explore and understand it” (as cited in Bray et al., 2000, p. 4). Lauren became an equal research partner through the process. This collaborative approach allows the participant-researcher the agency and control in how her experience is brought to light. Such a design facilitates greater validity since the meanings the team makes from the data are

considered by three researchers and authenticated by the participant-researcher.

## **Materials and Procedure**

Material for this inquiry included Lauren's course writing and her interview transcript. The research team selected particular pieces of Lauren's writing for analysis that shed light on her thoughts about her graduate and teaching experiences. Each researcher used double entry reflections for analysis (See below for a description of the reflections.).

Before Lauren became a co-researcher, Laurie and Jessica developed a protocol for interviewing her. This protocol was divided into sections to gain an understanding of the following areas of Lauren's experience: teaching position, ideas about children and childhood, university focus, experience with teaching, and thinking about the future. Laurie interviewed Lauren on two separate occasions in a private space at her school. Each session was taped and took approximately one hour. Later, the interview was transcribed for analysis.

## **Analysis**

We analyzed Lauren's writing and interview responses through individual review of the data and dialogue. Bray et al. (2000) define this process as "repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them" (p. 6). Each researcher reviewed Lauren's interview transcript and each course assignment separately using a double entry format. The right column included the key passages of the document and the left column provided the researcher's reflection on its meaning. These double entry journals were shared online before each meeting. Each time we met, we shared our individual responses and considered the large ideas embodied in Lauren's words. We compared and debated ideas until we agreed upon central themes. Therefore, we generated themes directly from the data; thus, the findings were "grounded" in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In keeping with the process of collaborative inquiry, we went through repeated cycles of individual reflection and group discussion that resulted in the discovery of new meanings of Lauren's experience (Bray et al., 2000, p. 90). The individual reviews of Lauren's work combined with meetings to share ideas and reconsider their meanings further validated the results (Heron, 1985, as cited in Bray et al., 2000, p. 27).

## **Results**

The themes of *School Dysfunction*, *Culture Clash*, *Disconnect between Coursework and Teaching*, and *Authenticity* emerged from considerations of Lauren's work. We discuss aspects of each theme with illustrations from Lauren's original writing, interview responses, and double entry journal reflections to support our thinking.

### **School Dysfunction**

When we reviewed Lauren's interview transcript in conjunction with her writing, we came to see

that Lauren felt that she was operating in a dysfunctional school system. Lauren saw the system as dysfunctional because of the constant state of chaos throughout the building and the poorly run support services.

The first example of the dysfunctional school system came from Lauren's description of her principal's philosophy on discipline and behavior management:

Our principal really believes there is no discipline; it's all positive behavior support plans. Which is nice, except there is no structure for the kids as far as knowing what's acceptable. I think it is hard to operate in that kind of system. (Interview transcript, p. 2)

Lauren felt that the chaos in school environment was largely a result of her principal's leadership decisions. Moreover, chaos from the students' home lives consistently affected the school's functioning. She felt that without the effective structures and support systems in place, the school itself only contributed to this sense of chaos. Lauren discussed the dysfunction of the school's various systems including support services for the children:

They [support staff] are spread too thin, and there is no real organization of those services to make it [sic] effective, to actually have that person come in. Because [for example] the guidance counselor has five people in his office from five other classrooms plus his mandated IEP scheduled time where he's supposed to be doing 1-1 counseling, which he never gets to because there are many different people he's dealing with. (Interview transcript, pp. 5-6)

Lauren described how she experienced this sense of chaos in her classroom as well. She reflected on how the pervasiveness of this chaotic environment negatively impacted her own ability to provide her students with the best possible support:

The tolerance for what seems kind of normal is actually a state of crisis for these kids on a daily basis. And I don't think that there are immediate and positive outcomes or reactions from the adults in the building. Or from me necessarily – kids that have breakdowns and I don't have the time to just sit with them and find out what's really causing the breakdown. It's not because they can't get up and get a drink of water. It's because something really hard happened at home . . . But everyday I can feel that presence of their lives, their home lives in the classroom. And I'm not dealing with them and nobody is dealing with them and we sort of just move on. (Interview transcript, pp. 4-5)

Lauren had gone into teaching believing that she would be able to make a difference in the lives of her students and perhaps even work to improve her school and the surrounding community. Instead she found herself overwhelmed by the dysfunction of her school and her classroom.

### **Culture Clash**

Another important theme that emerged in our data analysis was the difference between Lauren's past home and school experiences and that of her students'. She grew up in San Francisco in an upper middle class family, the only daughter of a European American mother and an Asian

American father, both professionals. Lauren attended private school throughout her education. After graduating from high school she went to a private liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Throughout the teacher education program, Lauren attempted to make sense of her role as a teacher in a community she did not understand. She felt herself to be in a foreign environment and wrote about this struggle: “As an ‘outsider’ who does not live in the community where I teach, I felt a culture clash” (What I Learned, *Classroom Inquiry II*, pp. 3-4).

In her final portfolio reflection on what she learned in the program, she describes the huge transition she experienced as she entered the classroom: “The first day of my teaching career was also the first day I had ever been a member of a public school and I felt very disconnected to the life and school experiences of my students” (KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*, pp. 10-11).

Reflecting on her ability to empathize with students and families, she wrote:

Being in private school all my life, I never interacted with people in different socioeconomic classes. There was also a limited amount of diversity (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) within my immediate social circles. My ability to empathize therefore could only be tested in very limited situations. Nonetheless I had been, primed by an empathetic culture, taught the moral lessons by my parents and given the vocabulary to express empathy in my school. When I decided to become a teacher I considered myself to be full of empathy and ready to “help those who were less fortunate than me.” (KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*, p.11)

Her hopes for herself as a teacher met a reality that was profoundly unfamiliar to her. In her reflection on this writing, Lauren described her trauma of becoming a teacher: “I was in shock during the first six months as a teacher – my students, their actions, their home lives, the way that other teachers treated them, was all really foreign” (KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*, p. 11). Lauren analyzed her exposure to the experience of school in a high poverty neighborhood:

I certainly acknowledged (and was blown away by) how vastly different my experience of school was than my students’ experiences. However, I never let go of the ideas of what school should be like and again, in struggling to replicate at least some of the experience, I ended up feeling burned out and really sad. (Lauren’s reaction to the KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*)

To Lauren, conflict between her values, worldview, and expectations and the actions of students and their families was overwhelming.

At the end of the program, her writing revealed what she was learning about herself and the limits of her ability to impact her students’ lives:

Although I thought I was completely prepared to throw myself into teaching at a high needs public school, I had no real notion of what it would be like to work with children in poverty. I can remember calling home almost every single day during my first month of teaching, recounting stories to my parents in utter

disbelief of the inequity and hardships that my students faced. It was very hard at the beginning to face the fact that I could not fix all of my students' problems . . . And even now at times I struggle to find the balance between capitalizing on the strengths of my students and feeling as though I have the duty to expose them to things beyond the scope of their own community and life experiences. (KEEPS letter about *Issues in Urban Education* writing, *Final Inquiry*, pp. 17-18)

In her final paper on her experience as a teacher-inquirer, she writes about her insights about the culture clash and the possible impact of this conflict:

The issue that has been both the most compelling and agonizing for me as a teacher is the conflict between my experience of privilege and my contact with poverty. At times this dichotomy has caused me to have intense feelings of guilt. And at times it has caused me to react to my choice of careers with frustration, anger, pessimism, and defeat. It is what pulled me into teaching in the first place, and what I worry will ultimately drive me away. (What I Have Learned, *Final Inquiry*, pp. 1-2)

She foreshadows her departure from teaching at the end of her third year.

In the same assignment, she realizes, from her experience, the centrality of class in family life and schooling:

Throughout my study and my review of literature I used the term "culture" rather vaguely. I think it took me a while to realize that I was not talking about culture differences of race, ethnicity, or religion. The "culture" that I was referring to was really the culture of class. I referred to my students' culture as a single entity because I was referring to "the culture of poverty" which they do all share. Lareau confirmed in her book, *Unequal Childhoods*, that class status really does have a systematic impact on family life and culture. Therefore, families that fall under the same socio-economic class share a common culture. (What I Have Learned, *Final Inquiry*, p. 2)

When Lauren entered teaching, she had a vision of herself as a person who could bring what she experienced in her own education and family life to a vastly different context and environment. Her subsequent feelings of alienation from the place where she worked and the students she taught led to a deeper understanding of the divide between poverty and privilege in the United States.

### **Disconnect Between Coursework and Teaching**

Lauren's struggle to navigate the dysfunctional school environment successfully and to face the gap between poverty and privilege was further exacerbated by a disconnect she felt between her coursework and her day-to-day teaching. From the start, Lauren did not feel adequately prepared to address her students' problems successfully and to teach effectively. As a Teaching Fellow, Lauren had expected that she would go through an intensive training before getting placed in a high needs public school. This master's program would provide her with the knowledge, skills,

and tools she would need to become a successful teacher.

Lauren assumed her first course, *Issues in Urban Education*, would prepare her to teach in such an environment. She completed the class during the summer before she entered the classroom, but when she began teaching she found that having read about urban education was not sufficient preparation for teaching in an urban high needs school:

I will admit that I stepped into teaching with an incredibly sheltered and naïve worldview. When I was taking *Issues in Urban Education*, I really did not understand the nature of the “issues.” I read from the course reader and then I regurgitated the perspectives of Kozol, Haberman, Delpit, Perrone, and Darling-Hammond throughout my papers. But I didn’t really have a clue as to the kind of social commitment that I would be attempting to take on. (KEEPS Letter, *Final Inquiry*, p. 17)

Evidently, Lauren felt that the summer coursework was not meaningful for her because it was not connected to her later school experience.

As Lauren progressed in her coursework, she continued to feel a disconnect between what she was learning and what she was experiencing in the classroom:

I think I had a clear separation between work and school. My school and the courses didn’t necessarily shed light on what was happening inside the classroom, except for the long term projects . . . But then the other part, the readings and the theories, I wasn’t bringing back into the classroom, or not consciously, I should say. (Interview transcript, p. 10)

This separation that she refers to created a tension between her graduate school learning and what she thought she needed to work effectively within a dysfunctional school environment and for students whose home lives were difficult. This tension was heightened by her desire to do well in her courses and, at the same time, speak openly and honestly about her classroom experience.

In her first inquiry project, a Descriptive Review of a Child, Lauren learned how to write non-judgmentally about her student, Tanya. However, in analyzing this coursework, Lauren recounted an incident that had happened between her student, Tanya, and herself that she had chosen to leave out of the paper:

I worked to have the principles of inquiry present [in my classroom] . . . However, Tanya was less and less part of the class. [I was] struggling between how to teach her while also how to see her. I was able to describe her, but it didn’t always translate into practice. In teaching, [there were] times Tanya needed to leave the room. But that issue was not part of the writing. I had a moment with Tanya where both [of us were] struggling with a chair. I engaged in a power struggle with Tanya that I wasn’t pleased with. [I] did not include this in the paper. [I] wasn’t able to write this because of the way the course was designed. (Lauren’s Reaction to Afterthoughts, *Classroom Inquiry I*, p. 1)

To deal with the tension, Lauren chose in this writing assignment to modify her descriptions of

her students' behavior and her teaching practice rather than to accurately report her experiences as a teacher. She did this in order to meet the expectations of her courses and to demonstrate that she was utilizing the espoused theories in her classroom practice, even when she was not. This illustrated how Lauren perceived the academic demands of the master's program to not provide space for her to voice the actual struggles she faced as a new teacher.

### **Authenticity**

The theme of Authenticity emerged when Lauren reviewed her writing and explained that some of her work did not reveal her true beliefs and experience. One example is her approach to the assignment, the Descriptive Review of a Child.

As shown in the above quotes about her Descriptive Review of Tanya, Lauren made modifications to her writing in order to minimize the appearance of any gap between the course's theory and her own practice. From Lauren's perspective, she was not revealing the actual struggles she faced as a new teacher. Instead of incorporating the lens of inquiry into a description of her power struggle with Tanya, she chose to leave out that interaction. She couldn't bring all of herself or Tanya into the Descriptive Review; she interpreted the instruction to be nonjudgmental as a directive to leave out messy, unpleasant aspects of her work as a teacher.

In the KEEPS Letter written in the last course of the teacher education program, Lauren expressed difficulty with the descriptive inquiry process and wrote that this kind of research went against her analytic inclinations and what she believed to be "natural," and what she desired as a teacher:

I had a rather bumpy start to my teacher inquiry research. TAL 830 [Classroom Inquiry I] felt like an unnatural process. My previous conception of research came from a very clinical stance . . . Personally I have always liked concrete answers. The research that I did in college appealed to my analytical side. So when I entered into TAL 830, I was still trying to seek out concrete answers . . . I chose to study the most challenging student in my class. She tested my patience as a teacher and my knowledge as a special educator. Finding apt language, observing nonjudgmentally, and learning how to support all aspects of this child was very difficult. (KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*, p. 6)

In another passage of the KEEPS letter, Lauren wrote about how she completed this difficult inquiry assignment: "As the semester carried on, I learned how to 'adapt' my observations to fit the descriptive model. Essentially, my research became less authentic and more appealing to the proponent of the descriptive review" (KEEPS letter, *Final Inquiry*, pp. 5-6). Due to the pressures she felt, some of Lauren's writing was not authentically representing her experience. Her efforts to meet what she perceived to be the requirements of the graduate program led to an unsatisfying academic experience, and possibly, a more significant gap between the coursework and her teaching practice.

When Lauren looked back at her work in *Classroom Inquiry I*, she read it as inauthentic and unhelpful in allowing her to explore her struggles with her students and work towards a more

productive relationship. She saw the method of inquiry as not allowing her to develop “a reflective virtue of [her] own” (Literature Review, *Final Inquiry*, p. 28). Bieler & Thomas (2009), in their study of how inquiry-based teacher education can silence new teachers’ voice and agency, found that “new teachers are often expected by their more experienced colleagues to imitate a model or to follow a method, but not . . . to challenge those assumptions or to inquire deeply into their own practices” (p. 6). From Lauren’s perspective, the inquiry method taught in *Classroom Inquiry I* contained, rather than expanded, her ability to reflect honestly about her practice as a teacher. Perhaps some of the reasons for her silence included her desire to do well in the course, to avoid questioning the authority of the professor, and to complete the master’s program without conflict. She had enough to contend with, internally and externally, in her life as a special education teacher.

### Individual Reflections

Although we collaborated to uncover the themes of *school dysfunction, disconnect of coursework and teaching, culture clash, and authenticity* to understand Lauren's experience, coming from different vantage points, we each had unique reactions to the inquiry process. What follows are individual reflections of what we learned from our collaborative inquiry.

#### Lauren

When I first began this co-inquiry process, I wondered whether I was qualified enough to do teacher research. I asked, “How can my autobiographical account be transformed into something that will be useful for the next generation of teachers?” In response, Laurie and Jessica reinforced the legitimacy of the teacher’s voice to me and emphasized the importance of providing the insider’s perspective in teacher education research. Still, I felt unsure about exposing my thoughts about the program, about my own teaching, and about children to my teacher-mentors, who had now become my colleagues and co-researchers. Navigating the change in the relationship and the shift in roles proved to be an integral part of the process.

I was somewhat nervous about reviewing my writing with Laurie and Jessica. I felt self-conscious about my work in part because I knew that I had not always written authentically. I reflected on the fact that “my fear of being judged caused me to at times filter my reflections.” Yet despite my inclination toward maintaining privacy over my work, I knew that it would be essential to address the underlying issues that caused me to modify and censor my writing about children and my experiences as a teacher. I recognized that I had originally been asked to join the project based on my willingness to share my honest concerns about my coursework and my relationship to it. I felt committed to allowing myself and my writing to become vulnerable to the process of close examination and interpretation.

The project design of reading and reflecting independently and then reflecting and analyzing collaboratively gave the three of us the space to express our initial reactions, reflections, and realizations. Although the individual insights that were made were valuable in their own right, the subsequent dialogue brought out new reactions, connections, and questions. We quickly recognized the value of hearing three distinct viewpoints. As the year progressed, and we became more familiar with both the process and our roles, our conversations deepened and our multiple

selves - educators, students, researchers, and subjects - were revealed in an open and honest way. I found that I became more confident about sharing my recollections as a teacher and voicing my opinions as a researcher.

Jessica and Laurie helped me to see how my struggles as a new teacher emerged in my writing over time. After finishing the program I was quick to leave my work behind, literally packed up in a box as the separate entity that I saw it to be. I had already made the decision to leave teaching soon after I graduated and before I began this research project. I knew that my leaving was prompted by the widening gap that I felt between what I wanted to do as a teacher and what little I felt I was accomplishing because of immense class and cultural barriers between myself and my school community. Revisiting my work so carefully and consciously helped me to see how working in a culture that was so foreign to my own had impacted my self-concept as a teacher. I also saw how my upbringing and background colored my expectations and assumptions about what teaching in a high needs school would be like.

This theme of “culture clash” first appeared during my introductory course, *Issues in Urban Education*. I wrote from a very theoretical place, following the formula of academic writing that I had learned in college, neatly making connections between readings and intended reflections. The issues around culture clash then began to appear in my writing in a much more intimate and yet guarded way as I began the inquiry courses. I grappled with how to depict my students and my teaching practice - wanting to adhere to the course guidelines in order to guarantee my academic success while feeling like I could then not tell the whole story of my struggles and conflicts. I was able to acknowledge to both of my co-researchers that I had been concerned with providing the “right answer” and as a result I sacrificed using an authentic voice to describe my learning.

However, toward the end of the program, the issue of culture clash bubbled up and spilled out of my writing finally in a truly authentic form. Perhaps it was my desire to bring closure to the two years of graduate work that led to my desire to write authentically about my conflicts, biases, and difficulties as a privileged teacher in a low income school. Perhaps it was the fact that in my last course I was asked to answer the question, “What did you learn?” In a letter format I was supposed to prove that I had learned the key educational principles espoused by the university. Being told what I *should have* learned finally gave me the courage to write about what I *had really* learned - that I had not resolved the issue that had been both the most influential and difficult part of my teaching experience.

## **Jessica**

As Lauren’s professor for *Classroom Inquiry I*, I asked her to use descriptive language that did not judge the child or her family. In my written comments I encouraged her to take out of her observations what I perceived as judgmental language and we had conversations about what I expected from her writing. In her final Descriptive Review, Lauren fulfilled my expectations and did well in the course. But in the process of working together as co-researchers on this study, I see how the course and my teaching constrained her ability to express the conflicts about class, poverty, and culture that she was facing in her teaching.

To Lauren, the institutions of the school and the university did not give her a place to learn through authentic dialogue about her life and work. She didn't feel she could bring her whole self into the classroom. As a result, the experience did not adequately acknowledge both her struggle to become an effective, accepting teacher within a foreign environment as well as the dedication and caring she brought to her students. Our lack of knowledge of her as a person inhibited her ability to learn as much as she could from the teacher education program.

The process of having Lauren participate in the inquiry as a co-researcher allowed her authentic voice to enter the conversation about her graduate school and teaching experience. Reading her work without her analysis would have led to different themes and findings. Without her acknowledgment of what was unsaid in her papers, we wouldn't have known the depth of the gap she experienced.

What I learned is humility about my own impact on students' thinking about their practice, and recognition of the possibility, and perhaps inevitability, of a difference in the meaning I make of students' writing in my courses, and the meaning they make of their graduate work. I also rethought and shifted my goals as a teacher educator. Rather than focusing on and privileging the goals and perspectives of the faculty and the program, I am trying to place my students' questions at the center of our conversations. I am trying to create and revise assignments so they emerge from the concerns and needs of my students' lives as beginning teachers. I am attempting to move closer to teaching that respects my students as learners and people, closer to the kind of teacher I am asking them to be.

### **Laurie**

When I initiated this research, I had become increasingly aware of the large gap in the educational philosophies of the University's progressive, holistic, inquiry-based orientation to learning and the public school's movement toward more prescribed curriculum and test-driven instruction. I wanted to have a deeper understanding of how students of teaching were experiencing this gap and what it meant for their ability to benefit from our teacher education program.

Yet, our inquiry process revealed concerns that Lauren had that were far from my own and far from what I had expected at the beginning of the project. I learned that as a teacher educator I was disconnected from Lauren's experience as a new graduate student and teacher. This became apparent when she had no response to a series of the interview questions about how she applied specific coursework to her teaching. Though I had been aware of the stresses and strains experienced by many teachers in our urban public schools, my distance from Lauren's difficult reality was much greater than I had realized.

The collaboration with Lauren and Jessica has allowed me to see how both my position as a teacher educator and my relationship to educational knowledge are different from that of teachers. I wanted our progressive teacher education program to help them transform their teaching and their schools. Not being aware of my distinctly different point of view from my students of teaching, I became frustrated by their seemingly dismissive attitudes to new ideas and their push for concrete answers to very complicated school situations. Lauren, as a new teacher

in a high need, overcrowded, urban public school with children who had a wide range of learning needs and other challenges, opened my eyes to the disconnections she experienced between graduate school and teaching, and between her cultural background and that of her students. Teachers like Lauren are often in classroom situations where they need practical solutions right away. I was not hearing the complexity and urgency of their stories. In retrospect, I see how different points of view can create tension for graduate students in the university classroom and alienation from their graduate experience. As I reflect on Lauren's story, I realize that my teaching needs to provide more space to hear students explain and explore their frustrations as novice teachers. It was through our collaborative inquiry of teacher educators and teacher – an interplay of individual reflection and joint analysis of Lauren's work - that I was able to see my distance from Lauren's teaching and to gain a fuller appreciation of Lauren's experience, and through her, that of other graduate students. "Experience actively reworked and represented becomes accessible to examination and thought. It is out of this formative activity that knowledge grows" (Himley, 1991, p. ii).

Lauren's struggles around having an authentic voice in her coursework raised many difficult questions for me. How did my teaching contribute to a lack of student authenticity and voice? Did such inhibitions in writing derail student agency? What aspects of our graduate program facilitated a lack of authenticity in coursework? My reflection reminds me of the common student query about a class assignment: "What do you want me to do?" I did not realize until our inquiry, that such a question reflected a student's problematic relationship to learning and that it could contribute to inauthentic writing and limited connections to classroom practice. I can see now how aspects of the graduate environment may restrict student authenticity, resulting in less meaningful learning and theory-to-practice connections.

### **Conclusion**

Lauren left teaching after three years to pursue a master's degree in organizational psychology. Lauren's story is a particular narrative about the combined experience of a novice teacher and a graduate student completing an alternative teacher education program.

The four themes of *school dysfunction, disconnections between coursework and teaching, culture clash, and authenticity* reveal the complex picture of her experience. Bringing all four themes together, we can see more clearly why a young, initially eager woman left the teaching profession in only three years. The themes show several disconnections Lauren experienced that as a whole felt too wide to bridge. One existed between a teacher education program based on the democratic, transformative possibilities of schooling and a beginning teacher's life in a dysfunctional, high needs, urban, public school. The gap between the ideals of the program and Lauren's reality resulted in her feeling alienated in both institutions, rather than challenged to explore the relationship between the two places and what she could learn from their differences. Another disconnect was uncovered between her hopes and expectations when she entered the Teaching Fellows Program, and the daily harsh reality of her school. The last disconnection, and possibly the most distressing, was that of the clash between her cultural background and beliefs and that of her students. These different "gaps" she experienced created tension and discomfort for Lauren that may have contributed to a lack of authenticity in her coursework (Kitchen, 2005).

The inquiry into one new teacher's experience not only brings to light these multiple disconnections. The findings offer clues as to how to bridge these divides and how teacher educators can better support new teachers through their first years in the profession (Bieler & Thomas, 2009). The concept of Ba, a collaborative space for knowledge creation, guided our research process and our thinking about how to approach discussions with beginning teachers. Dialogue in our program could offer more co-inquiry between teacher educators and beginning teachers. We need to provide a comfortable, nonthreatening environment for consideration of both the possibilities for public education and the difficult realities in high needs schools today (Espinosa et al., 2007). Teacher educators could help their students who are new teachers construct a bridge between the various disconnections they experience. If new teachers are able to speak more openly and authentically about their teaching, they may work through the various tensions that come from their perceived differences in culture, teaching, and graduate school. Some educators contend that if beginning teachers pursue questions in ways that emerge from their deepest concerns, they may gain the confidence and strength needed to promote progressive change in their schools (Espinosa, Kesson, & Vereline, 2006).

Palmer (1998) stressed the importance of the inner lives of teachers and explored the question, "Who is the self that teaches?" Upon completing the research process, like Palmer, we come back to the value of the teacher as a person and the importance of giving space in teacher education for the person to be known. Lauren would have benefited from an opportunity to discuss and write about her profound experience with culture clash in her school before she reached the end of her two year master's program and the end of her second year as a teacher. Though we acknowledge that the power relations within an institution of higher education may contribute to students' inability to be authentic with their professors, we in teacher education can move closer to creating Ba for our students and in so doing, give opportunities for open discussion and writing.

Our teacher education programs stress the importance of collaboration and description to understand children's unique qualities, strengths, and interests. The same values about children and adolescents embodied in our programs are to guide our work with our students. The curriculum could benefit from not only knowledge in the field, but from students voicing their concerns. At the end of her graduate program, Lauren concluded what the Program needed was "to discuss the true moral challenges of teaching in a culturally diverse community" (Final Inquiry paper, *Final Inquiry*, p. 28).



We need to provide a comfortable, nonthreatening environment for consideration of both the possibilities for public education and the difficult realities in high needs schools today.

Conducting this inquiry with Lauren as both participant and researcher deepened our understanding of new teachers' experience. "Working collaboratively with colleagues to create and respond to their own questions cultivates teachers' autonomy and belief in themselves as constructors and holders of teaching wisdom" (Espinosa et al., 2006, p. 5). If new teachers are given opportunities to openly and more authentically confront the disconnections they experience in their teaching and academic work, they may be more able to find meaningful ways to navigate the complexity of teaching and change within schools.

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