

Final Report to the PRAC Committee for African American Elementary Pre-Service Teachers and Engagement

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In my work proposed to the PRAC committee, the focus was on African American female elementary pre-service Teachers' engagement. I chose to focus on engagement since it is foundational to human learning. Engagement allows us to learn in what ways that we cannot learn alone (Freire, 1997). During their two year educational preparation, the pre-service teachers were positioned to engage in three spaces: university setting, school, and community in order to develop their knowledge of teaching and their perspective on themselves as engagers (Kastberg, Richardson, Hill, 2008). I proposed to provide insight into pre-service teachers' perspective on engagement, through qualitative analysis of a classroom engagement project and the Elementary Education Program Benchmark II assessment.

Sample and Instrumentation

Analyses reported here draw from a sample of five African American female elementary pre-service teachers in the second semester of their Elementary teacher preparation program at IUPUI. Students enrolled in the course, *Teaching Mathematics in Elementary School Grades 3-6 (E343)*, during their second semester. This course focused on helping pre-service teachers build a professional stance base for teaching mathematics for understanding in an urban context. Throughout the course, pre-service teachers collaboratively made sense of how children learn mathematics and the features of classrooms that support children learning mathematics with understanding. In addition, pre-service teachers examined the shortcomings of teaching the procedures without building student's understanding of the big ideas in the elementary school mathematics curriculum. The work for this course was grounded in the principles and standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, as well as on research on how students learn mathematics or in general. This course is complemented with a field placement in a local elementary school. In addition in this course, students completed a classroom engagement project and at the end of the semester a Benchmark II assessment; the data set was composed of these two data sources.

The findings summarized here are an attempt to ascribe meaning to and understand how participants think perceive their engagement within the university setting, school and with the community represented by their field placement, and in their field placement (focus student). The assignment used to explore students' engagement was created to give students the opportunity to interact with others as a means to learn about themselves and how they can contribute to the learning of others. Through a reflective process, students were asked to develop a perspective of themselves as engagers in the three previously mentioned settings. The Elementary Benchmark II is a performance task project evaluating students' ability to analyze a child's conceptual knowledge and design appropriate instruction. As a part of Benchmark II, students completed a self-assessment of their engagement with their focus students, which is the focus of this study.

Qualitative analyses methods permit an examination and understanding of a phenomenon in depth. It sheds light on understanding in a way that increases knowledge about a particular story (Patton, 2002). In this study, qualitative analyses gave me the opportunity to understand how African American female elementary pre-service teachers understand themselves as engagers within the school and community, their focus student, and their cohort. After receiving IRB approval, I mined the pre-service teachers' Benchmark II and E343 engagement projects after grading them and coded them for themes. The major themes which emerged from the analysis of engagement at the three levels included: (1) Valuing of self and others; (2) Responsibility of other; and (3) understanding through and with the other (van Manen, M, 2002). In this study "other" is defined as (1) their university cohort and

professors; (2) field placement school and community; and (3) students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Engagement with School and Community

Knowledge of community is foundational to teacher's ability to design instruction that supports community goals and encourages an orientation of questioning and participating in community activities (Principle of Teacher Education 5). Developing an understanding of the community and school enabled students to reflect on what they could (1) learn from the community and school and (2) contribute to the community and school. Students were given the opportunity to gather information and explore the current strengths, concerns, and conditions of the community and school in which they completed their E343 field placement (Kastberg, Richardson, Hill, 2008).

Students in this study completed their field placement at Jania Hill Elementary School¹. Jania Hill Elementary school has an enrollment of 443 students. The racial composition is 54% white, 38% black, 5% multiracial, 1% Asian, and 1% Hispanic. Homes in the surrounding affluent neighborhood range from \$131,900 to \$2,399,000 (*Trinity Jeffery*², 2008). Participants in this study described Jania Hill as a school with access to an abundance of resources. The majority of the school's population's live in the affluent communities surrounding the school but there are a small number of minority students who are bused in from less affluent communities. Participants referred to these less affluent communities as "pocket districts". The pocket districts consisted of apartments funded by section 42 rental housing tax credit program, a program in which apartments keep the rent affordable in exchange for a tax break. The homes in the pocket districts ranged from \$90,000 to \$110,000 ("*Trinity Jeffery*, 2008). As the pre-service teachers gathered and reflected on data to gain a stronger understanding of the school and community, they expressed a strong relationship between the school and affluent communities surrounding the school but noted that there was a disconnection between the school and communities within the pocket districts. Students noted that the school hosted several activities for the communities such as: (1) family association, (2) dad's club, (3) before school mediation and peer mediation, and (4) back to school, literacy, reading, and family fun nights. Though the school offered several before and after school resources to parents, students, and the greater community, pre-service teachers in this study observed that students from the pocket districts were not in attendance at these and other school board events and therefore did not benefit from these particular resources at the school. Participants in this study agreed that the lack of public transportation contributed to the lack of parental involvement of parents from less affluent communities. For the pre-service teachers in this study, engagement with the community and school centered on: (1) the importance of building a personal relationship with students and their families in the immediate community surrounding the school and the less affluent pocket district, (2) developing a greater understanding of the less affluent community and (3) being proactive in building a connection between those communities and the school. As an engager with the school, the voice of one of the five pre-service teachers captures the voices of all participants when she states, "I feel like *Jania Hill* has not made adequate provisions to meet the needs of this group of students, their family, and community. If community really matters than an activity bus should be provided to transport students as well as their families from their community so that they can feel like a true part of the *Jania Hill's* family or better yet how about taking some of these activities to these other communities (*Kiana Matthews*³, 2008)"? As engagers within the school, the pre-service teachers

¹ Pseudonym for actual school name

² Pseudonym for study participant

³ Pseudonym for study participant

expressed their commitment to learning more about the communities of students who are bused to the school in order to help the students and parents not feel like outsiders. They stressed the importance of gaining knowledge about all the communities served by the schools and the parents of all students. Understanding and valuing this knowledge was seen as critical to helping all students to feel that they are all part of the school's community and to providing students with the best education. They recognized that understanding the students' community helps the teacher relate better to their students. Pre-service teachers in this study stated it was their responsibility to advocate on the behalf of those students who was bused in from outside communities. "Recognizing that one third of *Jania Hill's* school population is comprised of students from communities that aren't necessarily considered as part of the school's community. I am committed to learning more about these communities as well as its families and students through interactions in the neighborhood as well as in the school setting, all in an attempt to find ways in which they can feel more like part of *Jania Hill* rather than an outsider (*Trinity Jeffery, 2008*)". They offered programs suggestions in order to address the disconnection between the school and the less affluent communities of students who were bused into the school such as providing an activity bus for students and parents who rely on public transportation who would like to attend meetings and events at the school, surveying parents about their needs and the needs of their students, and hosting school events within the pocket districts. In summary, according to the pre-service teachers in this study, engagement with the community and school involves: (1) building relationships with others and (2) understanding others.

Engagement with Focus Student

As pre-service teachers work in the larger context of schools during their field placements, they worked with one child to build profiles of the child's emotional, social, and academic talents. Drawing on the child's rich background and knowledge, the pre-service teachers could gain a better understanding of how the child positions himself or herself within the school and where the student draws support. As the pre-service teachers built on their understanding of their focus child and how to prepare for engagement and enact engagement in academically productive ways, they were to identify areas of growth and future exploration. It is through this process of reflecting on engagement with their focus students that the pre-service teachers were able to hone their skills and question their own practice. (Kastberg, Richardson, Hill, 2008).

All five pre-service teachers consistently focused on providing a positive image of their focus students rather than viewing them through a deficit lenses. The teachers described their focus students as confident in their skills and knowledge in mathematics. *Sophia Evans*⁴ focus student was retained in the second grade and was schedule to start the 3rd grade but social issues surrounding her caused the school to advance her to the 4th grade. Though this focus students was retained and was not taught a third grade curriculum, the pre-service teacher did not discuss gaps in her knowledge or any negative factors but instead focused on the students enjoyment of mathematics and her persistence to do well in mathematics. As participants in this study reflected on their engagement with their focus child, they highlighted the importance of valuing the students' way of knowing and doing mathematics. Furthermore, they were intentional about using this knowledge of the focus students' way of knowing and doing mathematics as a tool for instructional decision making in order to build on students' current understanding. As participants in this study built relationships with their focus students and observed their interactions with mathematical tasks, they realized that engaging with a child requires an

⁴ Pseudonym for study participant

understanding of the child first then their mathematical thinking. They viewed engagement with their focus child as more than an opportunity to learn about children's thinking but also a chance to learn about their own thinking and their ability to engage students in an academic productive way. As a result of reflecting on their engagement with their focus students, the participants shared similar areas of growth: (1) the importance of recognizing and attending to the learning preferences of children; (2) creating tasks that support students at their developmental level and help move them to the next stage in their development, and (3) the importance of being "aware" of where students are. Pre-service teachers also articulated that teachers should have the ability to informally assess whether students are becoming frustrated with a task in order to intervene so the frustration will not cause students to shut down or give up. This awareness of other was clearly articulated by one pre-service teacher when she discussed how she would lose her focus student's attention in the middle of the lesson. She shared that she had an "A-ha" moment when she realized that the focus student left the group to go to the nurse at the middle of each lesson for medical reasons and was not able to focus upon his return and this led to disruptions, because he was longer attentive or involved. Instead of writing the student off as a problem student, the pre-service teacher stated "this highlights the necessity of observations and reflections while engaging with students because it is through these practices that we're able to analyze the situation, gain a greater insight into what is really going on, and make the appropriate changes (*Trinity Jeffery, 2008*)". Through observation and reflection the *Trinity* was able to provide an alternative explanation for her focus students' disruptive behavior which did not place blame on the focus student. In summary, pre-service teachers in this study perceived engagement with their focus students as a: (1) a way of interacting with a child based on an understanding of the child as a human being; and (2) the ability to reflect on one's own way of thinking and interactions in such a way as to identify and address areas of growth.

Engagement with University Cohort

During the first two semesters of their teacher preparation program the pre-service teachers in this study have worked to understand themselves as mathematical learners, communicate and engage with those around them who may think differently, and challenge and encourage members of their cohort. While interacting with their cohort, the pre-service teachers explored ways to be change agents, and communicate in ways that are sensitive to a broad range of communities, In addition, they were asked to create a document that chronicled the development of their perspectives on engagement within the cohort.

Participants in this study were members of a predominately white cohort. They became more comfortable with their cohort over time. Though some students discussed negative aspects such as, overall students wrote about feeling comfortable within the cohort as a whole and being able to learn from each other.

As part of their field placements, the pre-service teachers worked collaboratively with small groups of five to six pre-service teachers from their cohort. Within these groups they were responsible for planning and delivering lessons to a small group of children within the school. Participants all shared the view that the small group collaboration was critical in building their relationships with others in their cohort despite some minor difficulties they shared about collaborating in small groups (e.g. electronic communications and reaching agreements on what to teaching within small groups). Participants discussed how engaging with their cohort helped them to gain a clearer understanding of their own thinking and an understanding of self. Though participants felt comfortable and learned from other members of the cohort, they found it difficult for members of the cohort to discuss complex and difficult

issues. Participants suggested that in order for their fellow cohort members to become effective educators they must challenge their own viewpoints on stereotyping of minorities. *Trinity Jeffery* felt that as an African American student it was her responsibility to bring up complex and difficult issues to help other members of her cohort grow in their own knowledge. Though bringing up complex and difficult issues often lead to controversy and was “nerve reckoning” to the student, she states that she will continue to work hard to improve how she brings up the hard issues. In addition to collaboration, communication and listening were two additional key components for effective engagement with their cohort. One participant did express concern because the structure of the Elementary Education program prevented students from engaging with the larger university community, because “most of the classes are in the school of education building and we are in class from 8-5pm two days out of the week and we are restricted to one group of people for four semester (*Alexis Fyre*⁵, 2008)”. For participants in this study, engaging with the whole cohort was characterized by: (1) ability to effectively collaborate and communicate; (2) respect the opinion of others; and (3) the ability to discuss complex and difficult issues.

Concluding Comments and Appreciation

One participant stated that “Taking a look at one’s self critically can be an eye opening experience. It’s when we are truly honest with ourselves, in general, that lasting effects can be made; effects that lead to growth for the betterment of our whole person, which trickles down to a betterment of the portion of society we have the opportunity to touch. Without this honest assessment of ourselves, we are left stagnant; remaining in the same situation we started out it” (*Trinity Jeffery*, 2008). The voice of this student echoes others as they reflect on their engagement within the University setting (self and cohort), school and community (of their field placement), and in their field placement (focus student). Participants valued themselves and others as learners. It was important for participants to understand others and to take responsibility for the betterment of others. As I examine the pre-service teachers’ reflection on themselves as engagers it was evident that these students value others and put the needs of others before themselves. Participants in this study acknowledging that interacting with others will help them become better teachers.

The work in this study is beneficial to understanding the perceptions and experiences of African-American female elementary pre-service teachers. I would like to thank the PRAC Committee for its support of this work. I look forward to further lines of inquiry launched with the PRAC Committee funding.

⁵ Pseudonym for study participant

References

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