Teacher Candidates' Critical Thinking in an Education Program Committed to Urban Education

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The purpose of this research was to investigate critically reflective thinking (CRT) among prospective teachers as they analyzed course readings and field- and school-based experiences that focus on the education of diverse students. We hoped to identify and trace the development of critically reflective thinking as it appeared in participants' reflections on their experiences. The following thematic question guided this research: At the conclusion of a year-long preservice teacher education course designed to foster critically reflective thinking, what kind of thinking is demonstrated in questionnaire results, small-group computer-mediated discussions, action research, and personal teaching texts? Ideally, this work allows us to help our teacher candidates develop pedagogical approaches that respect and validate the learners in their future classrooms. As a longitudinal embedded multiple case study, our data present a rich qualitative view of the participants' thinking, offering a more complete picture of the views of teacher candidates as they grapple with the reality of their classroom context at the same time that they develop their teacher selves.

Introduction

How teachers regard students' language, race, gender, and socioeconomic status has a profound effect on students' success in school (Comber & Simpson, 2001). When teachers believe that minority students' culture and language are deficits, they tend to seek solutions that "fix" the students, without questioning or altering the existing curriculum, teaching methods, or school policies that result in segregated classrooms and exclusion from success in school (Banks, 2002; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Howard (1999) writes that it is impossible to teach what one doesn't know and that teacher education must help educators to become competent in multicultural contexts. Strategies and responses must be developed that ensure teachers are able to meet the needs of all children (Sharp, 2003). Diversity in the classroom must be viewed as a positive and relevant aspect of education (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Villegas and Lucas (2002) provide six criteria for culturally responsive teachers that are based on a goal of working toward social justice. Villegas and Lucas' criteria are centered on the notions that culturally responsive teachers are those who:

(1) have sociocultural consciousness; (2) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds; (3) have a sense that they are both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change; (4) embrace constructivist views of teaching and learning; (5) are familiar with their students' prior knowledge and beliefs, derived from both personal and cultural experiences; (6) design instruction that builds on what students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. (p. xiv)

The first three criteria focus on attitudes and dispositions that culturally responsive teachers possess, and the last three criteria are focused on the actual teaching and learning practices of culturally responsive teachers. These criteria act as a framework for teacher educators to utilize in a preparation program founded on principles of advocating for diversity, teachers as agents of school change, and the construction of knowledge.

A noticeable demographic shift is currently under way in our public schools. Nationally, the student population has grown consistently along multiple facets of student diversity over the last few years. In 2004, the public school student population was 19% Hispanic, 16% Black/nonHispanic, 57% White, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3% other (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (as cited in Villegas & Lucas, 2002), this growth will continue over the coming decades with projections that place the number of ethnic minority students in K-12 schools as a numerical majority by 2035 (US Department of Commerce, 1996 cited in Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Many scholars advocate student teaching placements in diverse settings so as to better prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in urban settings, in ethnically diverse settings, etc. (Gay, 2000; Gomez, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As the diversity in our schools increases, the instructional strategies and social approaches traditionally found in the schools will need to be examined to determine if they meet the needs of these students who bring varied cultural and language experiences as well as learning styles to the classroom. Teachers must be aware of and responsive to the experiences, backgrounds and needs of students and become aware of their own thinking about the students in the classroom if they are to become culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). CRT encourages teachers to address and develop the criteria that Villegas and Lucas consider key in this stance. The goal of the present study is to examine preservice teachers' engagement in critically reflective thinking; that is, whether or not and how they challenge deficit thinking and question taken-for-granted assumptions to support all children as competent learners.

The research on CRT is highly productive, built on the foundations of critical theory and reflection in education. These foundational frameworks, although over 70 years old, still inform research and practice in education today (see Dewey, 1933; Horkheimer, 1937/1972). Schön's work in the early 1980s revitalized the study of reflection in education (Schön, 1983). Since that time, teacher education programs nationwide have begun to recognize the importance of critical reflection in effectively preparing preservice teachers for the demands of increasingly diverse classrooms (Milner, 2005; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). The large body of literature in this area and the current research trends suggest that teacher educators agree on the need for and importance of CRT and practice (Cochran-Smith, 2005). However, much of the research reveals complexity and highlights challenges, indicating a need for continued efforts in this line of research (Gaine, 2001; Milner, 2005; Swartz, 2003).

Critically reflective thinking has a variety of meanings in teacher education (Rodgers, 2002); however, common elements include understanding a dilemma or problem from multiple perspectives and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and unexamined explanations (Loughran, 2002). Key in this process is considering how dilemmas or problems are viewed and located in context by the teachers. This concept of *problem framing* is central to both Dewey's (1933) and Schön's (1983) conceptions of reflective thinking. To Schön, problem framing (what he called *problem setting*) is "a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them" (p. 40). According to Schön, problems can be framed in many different ways, each framing suggesting a different solution. Lakoff (2004) suggests that frames shape the way we see the world, and as a result, shape our goals, plans, actions, and what we see as the outcomes of those actions.

Like problem framing, seeking solutions requires ways of thinking that Dewey (1933) described as both open-minded and critically rigorous. Adopting a stance of open-mindedness, reflective teachers formulate only tentative hypotheses, which they then test with the aid of other professionals and theories. This phase of reflection requires intense and focused analysis, which Dewey saw as distinguishing reflective thinking from other kinds of thinking.

Although Dewey's and Schön's conceptions of reflective thinking focus on framing problems from multiple perspectives and using all the data available in seeking and evaluating solutions, this is not necessarily *critical* in the political sense of the word. To be critical, results must transform curricula and practice or alter the status quo (cf. Brookfield, 1995). Reflective teachers think about what they are doing in ways that go beyond questions of immediate utility (Does it work?) to consider why it is working and for whom it is working (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In asking "for whom is it working?," the critically reflective teachers examine the possible consequences of their actions at different levels, from the individual to the societal (Gore & Zeichner, 1991).

Most prior research with preservice teachers has found little evidence of critical thinking, whether it be in written case analyses (cf. Harrington, Quinn-Leering, & Hodson, 1996), whole-class case discussions (cf. Moje & Wade, 1997), online case discussions (cf. Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008), or other types of reflective activities such as journal writing (Leland, Harste, & Youssef, 1997; Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 1999) and action research (Gore & Zeichner, 1991). While some researchers have reported limited success in fostering CRT in preservice teachers (e.g., Genor, 2000; Hart, 2002), the inconsistencies across participants and the inability to connect pedagogy and outcomes call for research that is more comprehensive and in-depth (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Our study is unique in that we systematically bring together methodologies that not only illuminate the merit of reflection but simultaneously provide a model for CRT within the context of a curriculum specifically focused on issues related to diversity and instruction for English Language Learners. Using themes and related decision-making dilemmas that stemmed from course readings, preservice teachers were provided with examples of how the instructor applied a CRT stance when making decisions. The CRT methodologies of our study offer multiple platforms for exploring reflective practice with specific linkages to a curriculum that focuses on diversity within contemporary classrooms.

The project described here is a study of teacher development that examines pedagogical approaches based in theory and research on culturally responsive teaching. Course readings, assignments, and classroom discussions situate critically responsive teaching within the context of urban secondary classrooms with a specific emphasis on the learning needs of English Language Learners (Fueyo & Neves, 1995; Intrator, 2006; Olmedo, 1997; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Pedagogy included case studies using both whole-class and online dialogue and CRT through action research and the development of personal teaching texts (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). This study was designed to produce usable knowledge—that is, findings that other teacher educators can use as they design curricula that provide teachers with the tools of CRT, which is essential to equitable problem solving and decision making.

Research Methods

Study Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the research was to investigate critically reflective thinking among prospective teachers as they analyzed course readings and field- and school-based experiences that focus on the education of diverse students. As we worked to identify and trace the development of critically reflective thinking as it appeared in participants' reflections on their experiences, we sought to explore how our participants chose to frame problems, seek solutions, and evaluate their ideas through a lens of critically reflective thinking. The following thematic question guided this research: At the conclusion of a year-long preservice teacher education course, what kind of thinking is demonstrated in questionnaire results, small-group computer-mediated discussions, action research, and personal teaching texts? As a longitudinal embedded multiple case study, our data present a rich qualitative view of the participants' thinking, offering a more complete picture of the views of teacher candidates as they grapple with the reality of their classroom context at the same time that they develop their teacher selves.

Data Sources

Data from the experiences of Becky, Tanya, Donna, Wanda, and Olivia (names have been changed) were collected as part of a year-long teacher education program committed to urban education. Teacher candidates in a secondary education Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) cohort complete a four semester program, and those in this study were in their second semester of the program. In this year, three courses during a fall semester address curriculum, assessment, instruction, and classroom management in the context of field observations and an introduction to student teaching. Following these courses, the candidates experience a semester of field-based teaching in schools rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. Data sources focused on candidates' work samples, including action research projects, teaching reflections, course surveys, personal teaching texts (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995), and online discussions on curriculum themes related to access and equity for a range of urban learners. Additionally, interviews were conducted with each participant about their preservice experiences at the end of their licensure year. The interview questions asked participants to consider how their fall semester course work and experiences with critical reflective practices influenced their teaching practices and approaches to reflection within the context of action research projects (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

This study investigates the ways that teacher candidates learn to critically reflect on their experiences in urban settings and come to understand the needs of their students. Below are the specific questions we ask in analyzing the data as we explore their thinking and its development over time:

1. *Framing problems:* How were problems conceptualized and framed (or located)? Were problems ever reframed from multiple perspectives? What discourses, ideologies, and theories (cultural models) were being enacted and constructed? Not constructed? What ideologies and presuppositions did they reflect? Were they ever challenged? If so, how?
2. *Seeking solutions:* What solutions were proposed, and how were they related to how the problems were framed? How do these solutions align with culturally responsive teaching?
3. *Evaluating solutions:* Did participants evaluate proposed solutions by examining their likely effects on the academic and personal lives of students as well as their moral, social, and political consequences?

To analyze data from interviews, we used a matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to display conceptualizations along three major areas: diversity and reflection (and how they influence practice); evidence of critical reflection; and evidence of discomfort, frustration, and cognitive conflict. Interviews were conducted with each participant where questions addressed diversity in today's classrooms, participants' perspectives on multicultural education, and impressions of course related learning opportunities (see Appendix A).

Themes from online discussions and action research assignments were identified through a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which the research team explored participants' responses to interview and survey questions, personal teaching texts, and action research studies for emergent themes, eventually using the constant comparative approach to generate codes such as "diversity," "reflection," "critical reflection," "discomfort," "frustration," "cognitive conflict," and "critical approach." As these themes emerged, the research team revisited the data to confirm or disconfirm these themes across the different participants and the various data sources, engaging in a process of triangulating the various perspectives and experiences (field and university) to ensure repetition of themes. Analyses of data themes were also compared among research team participants to ensure consistency of perspective about the focus students. Cases were developed that explored each participant's experiences over the course of the year given the longitudinal and embedded contexts of the study.

Participants

This study examined the evidence of critically reflective thinking (CRT) in the perceptions and actions of secondary education preservice teachers. A cohort of 24 preservice teachers was enrolled in a secondary teacher education program at a western university. The participants, five white females ranging in age from early twenties to early thirties, taught art, English, chemistry, theatre, and Spanish. Study participants were chosen due to the range of represented content areas, the grade levels at which they taught, and their expressed awareness of critically reflective teaching as a mechanism for responding to learner diversity within their student teaching settings based on course experiences during the fall semester (students were selected to represent low, mid and high expressed understandings of CRT in the course student population). This purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) allowed us to explore the range of attitudes and perspectives included in this population of teacher candidates. Each student teacher is described in more detail in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant	Age	Subject Area	School Setting
Wanda	Mid 20s	Art	Alternative school for math, science, and engineering
Olivia	Late 20s	Theater	Urban middle school
Donna	Late 20s	Spanish	Urban high school
Tanya	Early 20s	Chemistry	Urban high school
Becky	Early 20s	English	Middle school English language "newcomers" setting

Mary D. Burbank, second author on this paper, has worked with student teachers in the secondary education program at the University of Utah for the past 14 years. She is currently responsible for teaching courses in curriculum, assessment, instruction, and management. Her work with inservice teachers and members of the local community informs her work with preservice teachers through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Understandably, her position in this work requires a degree of reflexivity in reflecting on the process and outcomes in this study, given her involvement and stake in the success of the student teachers (Sikes, 2006).

While considering the findings of this study, it is necessary to state the limitations. Because teacher candidates in this study were graduate students and all secondary education majors, it is not possible to extrapolate to other populations in teacher education programs. Also, it is important to note that the sample of five participants is a small sample size and must be factored into any consideration of the findings from this study.

Findings

The findings from our study are organized around the three questions that we used in data analysis in order to help us identify and trace the development of critically reflective thinking as it appeared in participants' reflections on their experiences. To that end, we sought to explore how our participants chose to: 1) frame problems: their conceptualizations of diversity; 2) seek solutions: the ways participants reported seeking solutions to addressing learner diversity; and 3) evaluate solutions: reflections of respondents' awareness of the myriad factors impacting the process of making decisions. For each focus area, there was

a predominant theme that arose from the data. As our participants framed their conceptualization of diversity, one theme that emerged was the varied way diversity was defined by preservice teachers. In interviews and reflections, each participant conceptualized diversity based on her own lived experience, which ranged greatly. When it came time to use individual frames that were responsive to classroom situations, different assignments or course activities and the lived experience of the school classroom had the biggest influence on how teacher candidates focused their critically reflective practices. Each candidate seemed to value a unique set of experiences and work from a combination of those experiences that helped her respond to the classroom. Another theme the research team noted is that the process of critically reflective thinking was often accompanied by feelings of discomfort and frustration as participants faced the demands of student teaching and realized the disparities in their own skills as teachers—disparities that motivated them to seek further development as teachers.

Finding One: Varied Frames for Diversity

The five teacher candidates represented a range of perspectives, attitudes, and responses towards classroom diversity, much like those found in many teacher education programs. As a foundation for understanding their trends towards critically reflective thinking and teaching in urban classroom settings, we describe each candidate's views on diversity in her classroom.

Wanda, an art teacher in her mid-twenties, who was uncertain as to whether she would continue teaching, student taught at an alternative high school specializing in math, science, and engineering. The small size of her school provided for an art classroom placement where the intimate setting and mentoring of a site-based teacher gave Wanda the support she felt was a best fit for student teaching.

For Wanda, diversity was conceptualized holistically to include experience, nationality, race, location, perspective, and ability, all of which had a direct influence on her content area of art. Wanda believed that diversity should inspire teachers to modify their approach, supported by a belief that all students can learn: "Students need to learn as much as they can now which will help them in future courses. *If sheltering content is the best way to make this happen, then do it!* Students need as much coddling and support as they can get" (Reflection on online discussion prompts, p. 2, italics added). For Wanda, diversity was a positive trait that leads to reflection as different students express their needs through words or writing.

> I think multicultural education means, um, where students from every background, every culture, are included and valued and part of the educational process. . . . where multiple perspectives are addressed and all students are included and appreciated and valued, and where they interact and learn from each other (Interview, p. 1). As one of my students explained, "Reading and writing about art and artists opened me up to other points of view. Then I could think from there." (Action research project, p. 26)

For Olivia, a theatre teacher who completed her student teaching at an urban middle school, diversity was conceptualized as different needs, and she saw this kind of diversity within schools as a positive dimension that contributes to the community. She believed teachers should adapt to the diversity within their classrooms because all students will have different needs and abilities:

> I think making sure that everyone has equal accessibility to my lessons, um, so that everyone could participate equally, or that they could all get something out of my lesson, which was very important to me. And the first step in that is figuring out what their needs are. Um, and the diversity that was there was just amazing. It was huge. (Interview, p. 2)

Olivia designed her action research project to discover the needs of her students, whether formally designated in IEPs or whether expressed informally in response to her questions. In Olivia's view, the teacher's role is to listen to students, understand all of their needs, and respond to those needs, a task that she felt was imperative but sometimes overwhelming:

I found that the best thing that I could do was to talk to my students, their parents, and other teachers. When I talked to them I learned everything that I needed to know to help my students (Action research project, p. 13). [But] I always feel that there is more that I could have done. (Self-reflection, p. 1)

Tanya, in her very early twenties, taught chemistry at a local urban high school. Her conceptualizations of diversity were primarily in terms of ability level, including an us/them view of honors versus "general" students and white versus non-white students (Interview, p. 1-2). Her expectations of honors students were different from those of general students. Tanya connected a student's lack of caring with being from a "different ethnic class than white" (Interview, p. 8). She described diversity as something "you have to deal with" primarily in terms of ability level (Interview, p. 1). She talked about her content area of chemistry in elitist terms and noted that there are not "much minorities" in chemistry. She said she was "kind of disturbed" about this, but even her suggestion for remedying it categorized students by race and social class:

So I think you need to be able to encourage the people who may not normally go into an AP class, who may just be in your general class—you see that they have like the right skills and the right abilities to do it, to try to encourage them to be able to try something that might be a little bit harder, might not be normal for someone from, like, their social class or their ethnic class. (Interview, p. 1)

She went on to say that in the sciences "there's not an opportunity to bring in diversity" which she doesn't question as problematic (Interview, p. 2). However, she did say that everyone should have access to the sciences:

They need to see that no matter where they are from, that they can do science. That just 'cause you are not white, or just 'cause you are not maybe as smart, per se, as someone else, you still can do chemistry, you still can do science. It's not like it's not accessible to you. (Interview, p. 2)

She acknowledged that everyone *should* have access, and teachers *should* contribute to this access by differentiating instruction by student ability levels, but she felt that if teachers did this and the students didn't excel with the normalized standard, then it is the students' fault. She gave some responsibility to the teacher, included no discussion of society's role, and located ultimate responsibility with the student.

Donna, in her late twenties, taught Spanish at the same high school as Tanya. Donna's broad perceptions of diversity included "educational backgrounds; what people have been exposed to; different abilities, strengths, and weaknesses" (Interview, p. 1). Donna highlighted how many of the practices within school communities that are theoretically designed to "welcome students" actually lead to "accepting" discourses that keep diversity "on the sidelines" and maintains an "us/them" division (Interview, p. 2). Donna noted that comments such as, "This is our school, and we're welcoming you to our school," perpetuate a view that some students are always the "accepted rather than the acceptors" (Interview, p. 2). For Donna, understanding issues related to multicultural education was about going "against the grain," "bringing up different perspectives, . . . non-white, maybe nonmiddle class," and questioning the power structure— activities and paradigms that go beyond just addressing the needs of students or adding on something to the existing norms (Interview, p. 1).

Becky, in her early twenties, taught English in a middle school classroom for "newcomers" to the US. Becky broadly defined diversity by saying, "No two students are the same." She viewed diversity initially in terms of ability level, describing her classroom as full of "huge diversity:"

There was one kid that was on a 504 and had to, um, had to have all reading assignments like a week before. And then there was one student who was writing a novel and sending it to local authors and getting feedback. And so, I mean, that was just really extreme, and everyone in between. (Interview, p. 2)

When asked about other types of diversity, Becky talked about backgrounds, where "students from everywhere" shared their histories on an assignment when they were asked to write about "a celebration in their country" (Interview, p. 3). She reported that she tried to pick assignments for her language arts class that were relevant or interesting to individual students, but that were "not necessarily meeting their multicultural needs," a situation she felt she would "really, really need to work on in the next year" (Interview, p. 3). She reported that there "wasn't a lot of room to address" diversity in this class because of curriculum constraints, adding, "Once I have a little bit more wiggle room, I can . . . maybe include some different things to meet their needs" (Interview, p. 4).

Finding Two: Evidence of Critical Reflection in University and Classroom Experiences

As part of their licensure course work, teacher candidates in the preservice classes were provided with assignments and readings designed to facilitate reflection through self study using action research, video analyses, and the sharing of self study journal entries by the course instructor. Throughout their course work, candidates were reminded through lectures and discussion of the inextricable relationships between curriculum, instruction, and issues in classroom management. Readings by Alfie Kohn (2006) challenged readers, and Kohn's philosophy was the focus of multiple discussions on where "problems" in classrooms rest. Literature from Villegas and Lucas (2002) and Zeichner and Liston (1996) helped to situate preservice teachers' thinking on the ways in which curriculum and instruction exist within the context of students' lived experiences. An action research component of the instructor's teaching demonstrated to students the merits of journal keeping and how this tool could be used for self-study. The components of the course touched different teacher candidates in different ways and were more or less relevant in helping them to think critically as they reflected on the realities of students' learning needs in their urban classrooms.

The influence of action research as a tool for responding to the diverse needs of students is most evident in excerpts from Wanda's reflection. Wanda's writing showed her awareness of the role of her actions, outcomes in classrooms, and the interplay between each student and variables related to curriculum and pedagogy. Describing an assignment on which most of her students did poorly, Wanda remarked:

> I am assuming this cannot all be blamed upon the student: This was the first literacy homework assignment I had ever given to my students. I don't think I was clear and specific enough about the quality and effort I was looking for. I provided each student with a handout and descriptions of the requirements, however I did not include a rubric. (Action research project, p. 17)

This kind of reflection is the first step of CRT, framing the problem so that the solution lies in the teacher instead of the students. However, Wanda took her reflection one step further to consider societal issues: "Schools exist to educate, not remedy or provide for family needs—*maybe that's just my dad talking*." (Revisit of online discussion prompts, p. 1, italics added). She then extended her belief in the value of reflection by requiring her own students to engage in it, and the results confirmed her stance that reflection is a worthwhile endeavor: "Giving my students the opportunity to reflect upon this question for themselves is also essential. I think they came to some realizations on their own and this is better than me just telling them."

The structure of Wanda's action research project prompted active reflection on the goals she'd identified for her project. So in a sense, she was forced to reflect and to systematically evaluate outcomes, including realizing that different students react differently to her class:

> I think by involving literacy along with the art making I reached more students; some students can create while others can understand/appreciate or theorize. Both of these qualities are important in the art world. (Action research project, p. 16)

By the end of her student teaching, Wanda was "sold on the effectiveness and necessity of reflection as a professional" (Self-evaluation, p. 6).

Olivia's action research study was based on her desire to meet all students' needs, and it prompted actions where she created opportunities for students to feel comfortable sharing their background and culture. She reported noticing differences in her teaching and becoming much more aware of her students and their needs. She noted, "Had I not been required to do the action research project I probably would not have been as thorough in my efforts to meet my students' needs" (Action research project, p. 21).

For Olivia, reflection was awakened not only through her course assignments but through the combination of the vast linguistic and cultural diversity within her classroom and through coursework in multicultural education. She noted:

> The multiculturalism class pushed me to think more about who I was and kinda opened those doors . . . A big part of that was realizing who I was as a person, and kind of the bias that I'm coming into a classroom with, and I think that without knowing that, it's really hard to address it. . . . And I think I was a lot kinder because of it. (Interview, p. 7)

Tanya's reaction to the assignments designed to foster her critical reflective practices were consistent with her views of learner diversity. That is, she compartmentalized the effects of pedagogy into fairly neat packages related to her action research findings. Her action research, which was reported in terms of student learning, as measured by test scores on pre- and post-tests, may or may not indicate actual learning and understanding of concepts. Overall, Tanya's view of teaching lacked reflection beyond fixing small problems or everyday things. Tanya's views of diversity are intriguing because they are so different from the other four participants, who had all experienced the same coursework. It may be that Tanya's involvement in a science field, which traditionally includes fewer opportunities for introspection and expression of feelings and cultural identity than art or theater, influenced her feelings of calm acceptance of the status quo. Alternatively, her reactions to the demands of teaching in general and teaching diverse students in specific may have been based more on her stage of development as a teacher or the timing of her field experiences than on her teacher preparation courses, as seen in her response when asked to describe her biggest challenge in student teaching:

> I didn't have anything that really gave me any problems. I, I was always surprised like everyone else was crying, and breaking down, and like I'm not having any problems! But I started a month early, to be over the general classes, so I had an easier transition I think, in that respect, because I slowly worked up to the four classes, rather than just having all four of them thrown at me. (Interview, p. 8)

Such differences of perspective and experience are puzzling for teacher educators, but they serve the purpose of motivating us to seek answers through more research. Over time, further interviews with Tanya could help shed light on this stage of her development as a teacher and her conceptualizations of diversity. Regardless, our teacher candidates identified different elements of the curriculum as helpful in supporting them as they developed degrees of critically reflective thinking and teaching skills.

Finding Three: The Complexity of Contexts for Critically Reflective Thinking

Of the participants in this study, it is perhaps Donna who had the greatest sense of the complex relationships between social structures, community interactions, and classrooms and schools, and the way these relationships affected on diversity within those communities. In her writing and the views she articulated during her interview, Donna indicated that there is more to good teaching than just plugging in strategies—teachers must be aware of broader influences as well. An example from Donna's teaching showcases her awareness of teaching as more than an immediate response to a student's action. When a student was caught cheating on an assignment, rather than punishing the student, Donna looked for underlying motivations and realized that the student did not have the language skills to do what had been required of him. She then made

accommodations through examinations of her own practices in addition to the curriculum and instruction. This focus on the integration between variables within classrooms was a central focus of course instruction and readings affiliated with coursework.

Donna's method of instruction in her Spanish language classes was one that addressed language as a dimension that is embedded within culture and lived experience. Donna recognized social norms as constructed and believed that they must be questioned. In a passage worth quoting at length, she expressed an awareness of the silencing of some students which had the effect of keeping them powerless, and she tried to counteract that in her classes:

> I saw students be marginalized. I saw them ignored, I saw their funds of knowledge downplayed, . . . the native Spanish speakers, they already had the Spanish down, verbally, a lot of it, they were great. But I saw a lot of [other teachers] just silencing them, and just not really accepting the power that they had. That they already had. It was almost like it was a threat, so [the other teachers] have to keep it down, and just bring up what they are weak in, constantly, which is sometimes it was writing. And just constantly say, "Well, their writing, their writing is not up to level, they"—just ignoring the fact that they can speak circles around even me. . . . But I always try to just tell them, "You know, I wish I grew up around it. I wish that I had what you have, but I don't. And I accept how I am, and accept"—you know what I mean—they loved it, because nobody would give them the props that they deserved for having it. (Interview, p. 5)

When asked to address issues of pedagogy, Donna addressed the commonplace "deficit" model of knowledge found in many classrooms. She challenged traditional definitions of knowledge to those that were broadened to include students' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and experiences. She recognized a personal responsibility in the process of learning to teach a range of learners and not only those factors relevant to language and culture. In a post to the online discussion forum, she raised an interesting question about the focus on urban settings neglecting the rural settings where students may also have unmet needs: "While I agree that urban areas deserve increased attention, I also feel that the poverty in rural areas is often overlooked" (Week 2, Online discussion forum). Donna was able to move beyond the scope of a beginning teacher to pull from her multicultural education theoretical background and interest. She was the only one who mentioned the multicultural education class as enjoyable and helpful:

> I really liked the multicultural education class, um, Introduction to Multicultural Research. And that sort of got me thinking about it in a different way, because it, it was all about how, it's always the add-on. We're adding on multicultural, we're adding on this. And it's never about disrupting the norm, the actual norm. And so I, I learned that theoretically, but it wasn't until I started, um, the observations and the practicum, the practice of student teaching, that I actually saw it in front of my own eyes unfolding. And so then I made, I was able to make the connections. (Interview, p. 4)

Donna's awareness of the systemic factors impacting students in schools was evident in her comments on current practices that are consonant with white, middle class values and perspectives. She reported that communities are responsible for recognizing the disparity of privilege and that schools should accept responsibility because they are partially to blame for producing the social stratification. Her view of the "sink or swim" mentality common in many of the pedagogical practices for students learning English is that this approach is simply a way to justify the maintenance of superiority of those not labeled with special needs (question 4). As such, she found the "sink or swim" approach to be problematic:

> While holding high expectations is important, meeting the students where they actually are is equally important. Classes taught using sheltered instruction may not prepare students for the rigors of the university, but sink or swim methods won't either. (Week 4, Online discussion forum)

To extend the rhetoric on best practices and disconnects for students within communities, Donna reflected on her action research project, a self-study on how her own practices and treatment of marginalized students might collude with or resist the culture of schools (including her classroom) to normalize white, middle-class values. Her study provided a conscious effort toward the vigilance necessary to monitor her work within classrooms that are complex and multilayered. Without the structure of systematic inquiry, practices are status quo, and even when teachers infuse "strategies" that are typically meant to reach a range of students, they typically lack the level of reflective practice that allows them to reach the level of reflection that unearths issues related to equity, justice, and opportunity. The format of action research, in concert with a critical reflective stance, demonstrates the potential to move teachers beyond the status quo.

Finding Four: Discomfort

One of the most frequently voiced reactions to the demands of student teaching and critically reflective thinking was a sense of what we will call "discomfort" (Howard, 2003). The relationship between critical reflection and "discomfort" manifested itself differently across candidates. Feelings of insecurity, frustrations with the realities of navigating through new territories, and the challenge of finding a "voice" (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995) in the classroom were typical reactions from this group of women. Indeed, they are typical reactions of many preservice and inservice teachers when confronted with the need to change their conceptual frame or their approach to teaching (Gess-Newsome, Southerland, & Johnston, 2003; Tsai, 2001).

The "discomfort" experienced by preservice teachers differed considerably from candidate to candidate, connected with factors such as developmental differences, content areas and the associated conventions related to pedagogy and curriculum development, and the contexts in which their teaching takes place. For teachers like Tanya, discomfort in her approach to teaching was limited to her fixation on skill development. In all aspects of her teaching and reflection on practice, Tanya was primarily attentive to superficial levels of skill mastery. In fact, she had so little discomfort that she expressed contentment with her current state: "I feel that I am basically what I was expecting to be as a teacher so far. I never really had much in the way of questions that I was seeking the answers for" (Self-evaluation, p. 1). Unlike Donna and Wanda, whose discomfort could be described as emancipatory, Tanya approached her teaching and reflection in a fairly perfunctory manner. For Donna and Wanda, their levels of discomfort extended beyond the confines of individual lessons. They were able to link their struggles to broader issues related to schools as systems and the sociopolitical factors impacting teaching and learning.

For Olivia, the metaphorical mirrors she found in her multicultural education classes, in conjunction with her school placement and surveys to students, caused what she described as a process of opening her eyes in ways that illuminated who she was as "disturbing" (Interview, p. 6). Her inability to reach each of her students was described by Olivia, "I want to reach every one of my students. I think it may not always happen, and that's a very depressing thought for me" (Interview, p. 10). Like many other preservice teachers, Olivia was involved in what is most often a rigorous, lengthy, and painful process (Howard, 2003).

In Becky's recollection on the year, she reported "never trying so hard at something where [she] felt so 'inadequate'" (Self-reflection, p. 6). Becky described her licensure year as a challenge. She found the process difficult because she struggled daily and didn't feel competent, though she saw the struggle as positive and resulting in growth, both as a teacher and a person. When confronted with the option of whether to take a job when two offers presented themselves, Becky confided in the researcher that of the two schools offering her a position, the wealthy suburban school was too focused on test scores and making parents happy. Instead, she opted for a school that seemed "exciting" and where she would be "challenged" and "an oddity" because she is white. The warmth and welcome she felt in an inner city charter school setting where "it's 98% African American, and mostly low income" far outweighed the familiarity of a setting close to her own experiences as a student (Interview, p. 11). Becky also mentioned that she did not feel prepared to meet different multicultural needs in the classroom. She felt that she had not "gone deep" and connected with students' backgrounds while a student teacher. She made some distinction between multicultural needs and

diversity needs when she suggested that she had met the latter but not the former. It was Becky's goal, as reported to the researcher before taking her first job, to create within her first year a different kind of environment where she would build community with her students. Becky's experience of discomfort led her to a new level of critical thinking and an increased desire to keep growing as a teacher.

Discussion

Considering critically reflective thinking in a teacher education program

The benefits of critically reflective thinking and teaching practices were not lost on the group of women in this study. Often, the realities of classrooms tend to override opportunities to critically examine practices within the day-to-day contexts of teachers' work (Berliner, 1994). But there were promising instances when participants looked beyond the logistics of management within the context of the classroom. While speculative, we believe (and some candidates outright stated) that some methods used in teaching in the program had an influence, in that they may have led participants to deeper levels of reflection than they would have engaged in independently. These methods included teacher modeling, peer online discussions, action research, student surveys, and portfolio reflections. Each type of assignment provided insights into perceptions of project participants and their reflective practices. The preservice teacher candidates moved toward increased awareness and change (i.e. the definition of "critical" reflection). The structure of the action research projects provided extensions for understanding broader issues for teacher candidates.

There were legitimate instances where participants asked of their own practice, "For whom is it working? And for what reasons?" The action research self-studies of Donna, Wanda, Olivia, and Becky reflect the potential for critically reflective teaching that examines the possible consequences of actions at different levels, from the individual to the societal (Gore & Zeichner, 1991). It seemed as though action research provided a catalyst for systematic reflection on myriad factors related to life in classrooms. Coursework, selected readings, and diverse student teaching placements raised questions, provided prompts, and magnified inequities in ways that gave pause for self-analysis and provided opportunities for critical reflection on their teaching practices.

Reflections from Wanda mirrored themes from Zeichner and Liston (1996) where critical reflection is present when one "examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice" (p. 6). Wanda, Olivia, Donna, and Becky were aware of and questioned the assumptions and values brought to their classrooms. They were attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts impacting events in classrooms and schools, and each took responsibility for her own professional development even when they weren't always sure of where to turn or how to respond. These actions identify strongly with the messages sent through fall semester readings on reflective practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1996) and may be one reason that the teacher candidates were more open to reflecting on these issues.

The portfolio reflections based upon personal teaching texts (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995) were particularly relevant for Donna and represent the depth of her understanding. The premise of the assignment is to *think again* through a review of where the student has emerged over time. Coupled with student feedback and video reflections, the Personal Teaching Text provided Donna with a mechanism that illuminated bigger issues that were overlooked within the day-to-day necessities/realities of the classroom. Within the body of her reflections she referenced the conflict between espoused beliefs and practice—teacher centered vs. student centered (pg. 2). She expressed dissatisfaction with where she is and realizes that there is an "ideal" image of a teacher that she is not living up to but that she questions the validity of the ideal. The platform of her discussion reflects an awareness of how student needs may not match what she thought they were (e.g., they want more assertiveness on her part). She reported beginning to set professional development goals for herself that extend beyond management to instruction and student motivation.

Conclusions and Implications

This work has important potential implications for the field of teacher education as we strive to develop more complex and supportive practices for educating teachers responsive to the diverse needs of today's classrooms. Our work examines the development of critically reflective thinking in teacher candidates, exploring both those ideas that have and have not worked well for our students. Specifically, we highlight the value of embedding critical reflection activities within the context of working with and learning from diverse students in real classrooms. The linguistic and cultural diversities that preservice teachers encounter in such classrooms can prompt them to carefully consider the intersection of their own beliefs and practices, current beliefs and practices in schools, and the theory and research presented in their teacher preparation coursework. This kind of critical reflection can lead to the discomfort that most often presages significant positive change in teacher practice. Some argue that discomfort, uncertainty, and frustration are necessary for a transformation in thought and action (Howard, 2003; Larrivee, 2000; Schulte, 2000).

Teacher education programs must also use pedagogy that includes explicit instruction, modeling, and direct application of critically reflective thinking connected to experiences in urban classrooms. This "demystification" of critically reflective thinking requires guidance and feedback throughout the process (Fisher, 2003). Tanya admitted she "never did a lot of it" on her own unless she was "forced" to reflect in a particular assignment, such as the action research project (Interview, p. 1). Likewise, Wanda stated that "just being asked to reflect made me reflect" (Interview, p. 7). Although the range of preservice teachers' levels of reflection varies greatly, Tanya was at the developmental stage we most typically see in undergraduate teacher education courses. As Wanda noted, many "just have never really been asked to reflect" and will not engage in the process independently. They require explicit instruction in the process of critically reflective thinking and need structured reflective opportunities or specific prompts that directly connect to readings, discussions, and experiences in the field (Howard, 2003). Those who are further along and are delving into deeper reflective thinking, such as Donna, still benefit from opportunities to increase self awareness, consider issues of diversity in their immediate classroom contexts, and examine their practice in light of their continuing professional growth. The real test, of course, will be whether these women continue to use CRT as they enter their first year of teaching. As Larrivee (2000) argues, "Any path a teacher chooses must involve a willingness to be an active participant in a perpetual growth process requiring ongoing critical reflection" (p. 306).

Perhaps our most important finding is that different strategies/pedagogies work for different people—the action research and written reflections worked better for some than for others, so having a range of choices and learning experiences is better than having only two options available to help preservice teachers develop critical thinking and teaching practices. Modifying, adapting, and customizing practice is exactly what we tell our preservice teachers to do: differentiate instruction according to student needs. Educators, teacher educators included, must allow time and build trust to accommodate discomfort. By using several strategies instead of just one, we can come closer to meeting their needs and cultivating the kinds of critical reflection skills that we want to build to better prepare them to work with diverse learners. As these five participants illustrate, some will be quick to embrace and internalize habits of critical reflection, whereas others will take more time. Modeling becomes crucial for those new to the process; Olivia noticed her instructor "doing it in her own teaching, modeling it for us, which is probably bigger than anything" (Interview, p. 8). Critically reflective thinking does not appear to occur by default. Teaching it, modeling it, and engaging in it collaboratively in contexts of diversity are necessary if we hope to prepare critically reflective teachers who will continue this practice beyond our programs (Fisher, 2003).

However, as we saw with every participant in this study, learning to be a critically reflective practitioner is not always an easy process. As teacher educators, we are in the unique position to provide platforms for critically reflective thinking that cause discomfort and distress in our students. Even those who readily and eagerly engaged in the process found it "unsettling" and "really hard" (Becky, Interview, p. 5; Donna, Interview, p. 4). We argue that these responses are necessary to critically reflective thinking in

that they challenge the preservice teachers and provoke deeper thought (Howard, 2003; Larrivee, 2000; Schulte, 2000). These kinds of emotional responses require individuals to stop and consider the reason for the response and to look inward for answers, tasks that require courage (Vavrus, 2002). If the experience is too uncomfortable, it is likely to be counterproductive. Teacher educators must create opportunities for critically reflective thinking that challenge preservice teachers within a safe, collaborative, supportive context. To engage in pedagogical activities that are personal and difficult, there must be time spent in building community, trust, and supportive relationships. Teacher educators must nurture preservice teachers' confidence in themselves as well as challenge them to rethink and reflect on their experiences (Schulte, 2000). Again, fostering critically reflective thinking and practice is a time intensive and gradual process, one that requires the willingness and true commitment of teacher educators (Howard, 2003).

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Appendix A: Interview Questions
Spring 2007 (End of Year)

Topics for questions with suggested probes beneath…
I.   Diversity in today's classrooms
    1. What does the term "multicultural education" mean to you?
    2. How do the diverse needs of learners impact your classroom as a secondary educator?
    3. What role does multicultural education play in your classroom as a secondary educator? How do you see this intersecting with your particular content area?
    4. In what ways, if any, do the diverse needs of learners impact teaching in your particular content area?
            PROBE—Can you speak specifically to the needs of a diverse range of English Language Learners?

II.   Course-specific learning opportunities
    1. In your cohort courses this year, describe the most effective learning experience that you had to prepare yourself for a diverse student population in your field setting.
    2. What is your understanding of the role of reflection in coming to know yourself as a teacher?
    3. What do you believe your instructor felt was the role of reflection in learning to teach?
    4. What are some of the tools that you might include in your practice that will allow you to reflect on your teaching?
    5. How did your field experience support you in learning to teach the variety of students that you might have in future classrooms?
    6. What was your biggest challenge this year (besides managing the workload)?

III.   Role of teachers/future plans of individual candidates
    1. Describe the school setting where you student taught. Were issues (not sure I like the word issues) of multicultural education present there? How did you work to meet the needs of a diverse student population?
    2. What do you see as the role of the school in helping students to become all that they can be?
    3. What do you see as the teacher's role in helping students to become all that they can be?
    4. What are your plans for a teaching job next year?