Changes in Beliefs and Identities of Urban High School Tutors

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American education has struggled to develop systems for meeting the needs of low-income and minority students (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Students in urban schools score less well than their counterparts on standardized tests, have higher dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006), and have higher recorded incidences of student disciplinary infractions, including suspensions and expulsions (Denn, 2002). Urban schools are often under-funded and overcrowded (Schwartz, 2001), and struggle to provide instructional programs that are on par with those of their more affluent suburban counterparts. Additionally, the popular media frequently depict, and perhaps embellish, these disparities, influencing the public's perception of urban schools and urban students, including those who might some day choose to enter the teaching profession (Tillman & Trier, 2007).

In the case of teaching and learning, perceptions matter. Studies have consistently found that the beliefs teachers have about their students and schools influence the kind of learning opportunities that their students receive, particularly in urban schools. Research also demonstrates that the predominantly white middle class workforce expects less of students from urban settings, many of which are African-American and/or Latino (Irvine, 1990). Preservice teachers, most of whom did not attend urban schools themselves, often hold beliefs about urban schools that depict them as less safe with less motivated students whose parents are less supportive (Terrill & Mark, 2000). Furthermore, when they envision themselves as teachers or tell stories about themselves as future teachers (part of professional identity) (Leuhmann, 2007), they often are not planning on urban school teaching careers.

One commonly used strategy for changing preservice teachers' often stereotypical beliefs about urban students and schools is to increase their experience working in urban schools, even though this experience is typically done in classroom settings as part of a teacher education program's organized field experiences. This study, however, seeks to describe and understand a different kind of experience for preservice teachers—tutoring organized by a social service organization. The *Say Yes to Education* program (SYTE) is one such organization that is held in schools during the school day, but not in traditional classroom settings. I believe that speaking to university students that are working as tutors within this unique context, will inform a qualitative study designed to answer the following research questions:

- How does a tutoring experience in urban schools affect the tutor's beliefs about urban schools and students?
- How does the experience influence their perception of themselves as future teachers (or non-teachers)?
- What do these experiences help us understand about tutoring programs?

Research Setting

The Syracuse City School District (SCSD) is filled with schools that reflect many of the challenges found in urban settings nationwide. While three out of every four students in New York State, who entered ninth grade in 2006, graduated in 2010, only 45% of the students from Syracuse high schools reached graduation that same year (Riede, 2011). Syracuse's rate was the lowest among the Big 5 urban districts in the state, ranking below New York City, Rochester, Buffalo and Yonkers.

In 2010, SYTE, a national, non-profit education foundation, partnered with the SCSD and Syracuse University (SU) to create a collaborative committed to increasing high school graduation rates for Syracuse's urban youth.[1] SYTE, who also operates chapters in Hartford (CT), New York City, and Philadelphia, has been designed to support economically disadvantaged students and their families by providing them with a range of services they believe will help students graduate from high school, accomplish post-secondary educational success, and achieve meaningful life goals (SYTE, 2011).

Methods

SYTE employs tutors and volunteer tutors to work in local urban schools. Tutors participate in tutoring during the day at the local high schools at least once a week, but sometimes more depending on their schedule. Tutoring is at least a semester-long commitment. Focus groups were conducted on SU's campus with preservice teachers assigned to tutor at each of the local high schools.

In a focus group one student's responses may provoke responses from others in the group, and information that wouldn't ordinarily enter a one-on-one interview, where students are more reluctant to share based on preconceived notions of authority, can be obtained (McDonald & Topper, 1989). According to Patton (1987), focus group interviews are essential in the evaluation process, and as part of a needs assessment. In an effort to provide more specific, nuanced information about student's views and experiences, focus groups are a valuable method for (a) gaining access to reports on a wide range of topics that may not be observable, (b) providing students with an opportunity to interact more openly in a permissive, non-threatening environment, and (c) ensuring that the data will be directly targeted to the researchers interests (Krueger, 1988). Focus groups suit the research questions of this study by giving tutors from different educational backgrounds an opportunity to co-develop a theory that will better represent how the overall population of preservice teachers perceive urban schools, urban students, urban education, and tutoring programs.

Each focus group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and focused on tutors describing their experiences as tutors, their beliefs about urban schools and students, and their future career plans. Student observations were based on experiences with the program ranging from a few days, to a few weeks in the local schools. Each of the four students interviewed had experience tutoring or working as a peer mentor in their own high schools before arriving at SU. Each student also came from a unique background (despite the fact that two students had experience attending school in urban settings and all four of the participants were women). One of these students was bilingual and grew up and attended high school in New York City. Another attended a magnet school in Southern California that she characterized as being similar to the urban settings here in Syracuse. Another participant was from a rural district and graduated with a class of only 99 students. There was also one international graduate student who attended a boarding school in China with classes that had as many as 60−70 students per teacher. All of the students interviewed were

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1　The majority of students enrolled in area schools are African American, 84% of students in the district receive free or reduced lunch, 12% are English Language Learners, and 21% have been diagnosed with special needs (District Demographics, 2011).

pursuing disciplines of study other than education.

I conducted all the interviews, all but one was audio-recorded, and each interview was transcribed for analysis. Data analysis proceeded inductively using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were read and re-read, and then noted for emergence of themes. These themes, once identified, were then used to develop codes. There were two types of codes chosen for the purpose of this study. The first type included tutor's beliefs about urban schools. Most of these beliefs were developed during the tutors' experiences as K-12 students and influenced their responses to topics such as academic achievement, discipline, competition, leadership, school culture, organization, responsibility, expectations, and communication. A second set of codes were developed in response to student's experiences as tutors, and include students perceptions of the tutoring program, tutoring site, community, the instructional program, benefits, challenges, and logistical concerns.

Findings

Each of the tutors involved in SYTE shared similar experiences with urban students and schools. Many of these experiences had a significant impact in developing or re-shaping their views about urban settings. In this section, I will present tutors' beliefs about urban settings as they relate to their prior experiences as students and their current position as tutors. I will then include how these experiences have shaped their outlook on the work being done in these schools. Finally, I will depict what these experiences help us to understand about tutoring and teaching in urban settings.

Urban Schools & Students

Despite the diverse backgrounds of each of the four participants, it became clear after interviewing that each tutor was successful academically before arriving at SU. It is important to note that each of the tutors expressed having been pushed by their teachers and peers, and that they felt their own schools ran great. While tutors with previous experiences in urban settings were able to relate to the minority students, security presence, and poor teacher-to-student ratios present in each of the high schools, neither they, nor the non-urban students, had come from schools that were struggling to help their students succeed at the same rate as schools locally. This became a key vantage point from which each of the participants explored their understanding of the work being done in these schools, and the attitudes their tutees held towards their education.

Experiences in urban schools lead the tutors to talk about the congenial, yet apathetic environments present in each of their tutoring sites. The tutors felt that a competitive learning environment was something that was lacking in each of the schools. Some of these tutors thought that teachers at the sites were disorganized, and didn't push the students to succeed. This came as a huge shock to tutors who repeatedly expressed that the informal teaching approaches they observed were something they had never before seen.

> Tutor: "The teachers just feel like their goal is to get them out of high school but there's no hope for them to do anything more so why push them. I definitely can understand why there'd be a little bit of apathy there. When there's a lot of kids you know out there that you know could benefit by the work that you do (teaching)."[2]

Another point expressed by each of the tutors was that they felt the teachers didn't have the best understanding of the content. Each of the tutors interviewed is developing as an expert in a field other than education, and each provided explanations and alternatives for how they could more effectively teach content.

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2   This tutor was referring to the kinds of kids she went to school with. Kids that were motivated to succeed and whose teachers (presumably) engaged them in rigorous instruction.

Some were even designing curriculum plans for the students to which they were assigned based on conversations they had with the students and the students' classroom teachers.[3] The majority of the tutors thought that the teachers deserve more respect than they're given, and that they need to demand that more from the students. Experiences as tutors in urban settings instilled a desire in each of the tutors to provide the students with more structure for both the normal curriculum in each site, and the SYTE program itself. Tutors also felt that while the teachers emphasized the importance of going to college, that a lack of urgency was evident.

> Tutor: "One thing that really shocked me was that I was in a classroom with three students who were leaving for the day and the teacher said, 'I just want to say one thing to you, it's so important to go to college.' And the way the teacher said it shocked me because where I came from it was a given that you were supposed to go to college. It wasn't an option for me at my high school. And these kids aren't really expected to go. Of course they (teachers) want them to but no one is really pushing them."

Tutors in urban schools locally found that many of the students that were being served by SYTE had low confidence, and were uncomfortable asking tutors questions. They also recognized that students weren't getting the support they needed to succeed in school and that they were behind where they should be academically. As a researcher in the district, and a product of one of the same schools where these tutors had their first postsecondary tutoring experiences, I've been fully aware of the challenges faced by these students for some time now. Tutee/student apprehension to engage with adults (in our case young adults) can in part be attributed to the overcrowded classrooms and the lack of one-on-one instructional support these students typically receive (McCroskey, 1980). This apprehension is at times exacerbated by anxious, apprehensive tutors and site coordinators who lack experience in the classroom, and who are struggling to engage with students from backgrounds very different from their own.

> Tutor: "I feel like everyone is really disconnected and that there's a dichotomy between the students and tutors as well as the international tutors and the tutors that are from America. The international tutors seem like they want to be there but they're lost, and they're trying really hard not to be lost. And then the other kids (tutors) aren't taking it seriously. I think some of them want to, but they're too afraid of being judged so they just kind of don't engage."

This is a serious problem considering each of the tutors reported encountering students that are in a state of emergency academically. Tutors were surprised and confused by the dropout rates that were presented to them at the beginning of the program. These statistics caused the tutors to wonder how things could have become this bad. Despite this sense of urgency apparent in the program's mission and goals, each of the tutors found that the schools were disorganized and unprepared to receive support from SYTE.

> Tutor: "I feel like things there are really disorganized. The tutors don't know what they're doing, the kids don't know what they're doing, and we never know where we're going to be. So it's been a bit of an issue because everyone's asking each other where they're supposed to be or what we're supposed to do and no one has the answer."

Despite the confusion, tutors have expressed a real desire to help make a difference in the lives of the students in these schools.

> Tutor: "I do feel bad because I met these kids and I do just really want them to do well, so even though we're unprepared (as tutors) and everything's a little bit disorganized (with the program) I want to be there for them, because I'm closer to their age. I feel like I can relate to them. I have a background that is parallel. I can't help but want them to do well because I didn't really get the support system I

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3   Often times tutors coordinated with classroom teachers outside of tutoring hours so as to better structure their instructional contact with students during tutoring visits.

needed in school from the public education system, I got it from my parents."

Tutors repeatedly encouraged students to find something they're good at and to pursue that in their quest to attend college. They also remarked that students need to see what's beyond high school. While the program provides students with opportunities to visit local institutions of higher learning such as SU, many of the tutors wonder if false promises are being made to students who may now have unrealistic expectations for what is possible; given their current academic situations.

> Tutor: "I felt like we were providing them with a false sense of hope. It's one thing to tell them working hard in school will pay off, but it's another thing to tell them you can get into Columbia, or SU, and we'll pay for it. I feel like it's unfair to give them unrealistic expectations."

Tutors reported that while they were in full support of the tutoring program's mission and goals, the program is in part contributing to the overall quality of programming that is being made available to students in urban settings.

> Tutor: "SYTE is like an idea of a program. The poor structure and organization reinforces the struggling climate of these schools."

This disorganization was evident in the way SYTE implemented their support in each urban school, and contributed in no small part to the beliefs tutors have about urban schools and students.

Outlook

All of the tutors agreed that based on their experiences as urban tutors, they wouldn't discriminate against teaching in these schools in the future. Each of the tutors saw the experience as a rewarding one, and enjoyed being able to help kids that they felt really needed it. Tutors also thought that their experiences helped instill in them a drive to possibly teach one day.

> Tutor: "I think it affected me positively to see how they struggle, and see the drive and the push they need to succeed. To see how valuable that support actually is to these kids, that makes me want to help them in the future."

The difficulties reported by the tutors regarding the implementation of the SYTE program, prompted the tutors to provide the students with more structure. While each of the tutors reported that the SYTE staff had the students best interests at heart, they also felt that they were bad at relating to urban students and too gentle with the curriculum.

> Tutor: "I feel like he's (site coordinator) amicable but he's really bad at relating to the kids and he's too gentle with the curriculum. He wants to take it easy on them. We had to grade SAT responses today, and all of them were really, really bad and he was like 'Well, this shows that they have some sort of ideas and that they maybe understand the curriculum a bit more,' but what all the tutors agreed on today was that these responses would not cut it at all. So we're a bit frustrated because he wants us to take it easy on them but we don't know if taking it easy on them is the best way to go."

Despite the fact that many of the tutors have had little or no experience tutoring or teaching in urban settings, each developed some understanding of what it would take to improve the teaching and learning taking place. Tutors felt that keys to being a successful teacher/tutor included being able to (a) relate to people, (b) understand how students learn, and (c) alter ways of teaching to reach the students. Tutors also felt that consistency and support across tutoring sites would be a necessary first step to designing a tutoring program that could focus more on the students needs and less on logistical concerns.

> Tutor: "I think one of the issues the program is having is consistency in every school. I don't like how all the schools are different. There needs to be stability, and everyone needs to be on the same page otherwise we're haphazardly trying to help these kids."

Understanding Tutoring Programs

Tutoring programs like SYTE help tutors understand what it feels like to be a teacher. Tutors met with their site coordinators to do actual curriculum planning, to talk about things they want to teach, topics that need to be addressed, and to grade tests. Tutors reported that the program was more work than they thought it would be. While each of the tutors had experience with peer mentoring or with tutoring in the past, their urban experiences helped each of the students understand what new teachers in these schools must face.

Tutors identified that there would need to be ongoing mentoring and support for young teachers. These views align with existing research that says ongoing professional development needs to be a part of teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It also forces educators to identify that this is a glaring problem in urban settings that struggle to retain young teachers. Each of the university students reported that based on their tutoring experiences they did not feel that one needs an education background to do a really great job as a teacher or tutor in these schools, but that an educational background can help in understanding how students think.

One tutor mentioned that the tutoring program needed to be better adapted to the individual needs of the students.

> Tutor: "I know it's benefiting some of the kids but it needs to be more organized and individualized because one size doesn't fit all—I get the point of the initiative and it's trying to do something important but they're just not reaching those kids that are starting from zero."

Tutors also reported that they felt working with students that were in some cases only a few years younger than they were, was a beneficial opportunity for high school students to connect with more realistic role-models. Young tutors of high school students may have had similar experiences growing up, and this connection between student and learner is something that is sorely lacking in many urban schools. Tutors believe that many of the students are working harder to improve using the help of these tutors. The one-on-one support is something that few students in urban settings have an opportunity to receive. When that support is coming from an emerging content expert, who is not only enthusiastic about the subject matter, but about helping students succeed, it is clear that programs such as SYTE have the potential to motivate students and improve the instructional programs in the schools.

Discussion

Urban schools have the potential to help teach preservice teachers from non-urban backgrounds about the realities of urban education, and the psychology of urban students (Sleeter, 2001). However, research has demonstrated that preparing teachers for effective practice in diverse schools is a difficult task and attempts at preparing teachers for positions in urban settings have largely failed (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Despite this knowledge, I found that tutors from overseas and those from rural backgrounds reported developing a better understanding of why some students succeed here in the U.S. while so many others fail after their urban tutoring experience. This understanding may help these schools in their quest to retain teachers, reverse trends of resegregation, and retain a more balanced student demographic as these tutors may one day be given a choice to enter urban schools as either professionals or parents (Orfield & Yun, 1999).

While some tutors are having an impact in their work with urban high school students, one can't help but wonder if programs like SYTE, and *Teach for America*, that employ students with little to no background as educators, are the best ways to help the students that need the most support. Many young students, including one of the interviewees, view programs like these as pit stops on the way to more lucrative careers in fields other than education. As a result, problems facing chronically failing schools are being further aggravated by the revolving-door effect (Ingersoll, 2002; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010). Programs

like SYTE help raise awareness about urban education, but they may also be contributing in part to the low-attrition rate that is critically important to the success of the same schools they are trying to help.

It is important to note that while SYTE is in theory working with the students' best interests in mind, and provides a range of services that the students, staff, and community regard as essential, it is still struggling to coordinate programming for students as they near the end of this, their third year of operation in Syracuse. SYTE has helped increase graduation and college-going rates among small groups of students in other cities, but in Syracuse, the first city where SYTE has taken on an entire school district there are no such results yet (Riede, 2011). SYTE officials expect that sustained movement in test scores will not begin to happen for another two years. As SYTE continues to branch out into other struggling big-city districts, it will be interesting to see if the program learns from its mistakes here in Syracuse.

Conclusions

If tutoring programs like SYTE are going to make a difference in the lives of students and their families, they need to start by asking tutors a range of questions about the experiences they are having in urban schools. If research can identify and prescribe ways to make tutoring programs more consistent, stable, and better organized, it will be able to provide support with the students needs in mind and improve student-learning outcomes. Tutors like the ones interviewed for this study, university students, and recent university graduates, are at the front line of programs that invest million dollars in developing core instructional practices in schools across the country (Gold et al., 2005). After speaking with tutors in each of the local high schools the following became clear as it relates to the research questions:

· Urban schools can help teach tutors, especially international students or students from non-urban settings, learn about the education situation here and the psychology of the students in these schools.

· Tutoring in urban settings shows tutors that teaching and helping others is something they're interested in. It also makes these students into more confident tutors and may inspire their work as future educators.

· Tutoring programs like this one provide students with valuable opportunities to connect with role models that are closer to their age, may have had similar experiences growing up, and who are emerging content experts.

Tutors perspectives are vital for shaping the work being done in schools and their voice has been largely ignored as it relates to improving the efficacy of both the programs in which they're employed, and the schools they've been asked to improve. By better understanding the effects of tutoring programs on tutors, we can develop improved programs for tutors. These improved programs may lead to more tutors choosing to teach in urban schools, help to diminish the resegregation rate, and raise the attrition rate for teachers in urban settings.

Limitations

As the program continues to grow, many of the wrinkles experienced by the tutors when these interviews were conducted near the beginning of the school year are now in the process of being smoothed out, and structure has begun to take root in the schools. It is important to note that the majority of these interviews were conducted near the beginning of the program's third full-year of implementation. As a result, all of the students interviewed for this study entered sites at a time when the SYTE program was struggling to coordinate with city schools, and adding services for the first time to some of the same sites in which these tutors worked.

Another limitation of this study is the small sample of students interviewed. Although over 51 students

were invited to participate in the study, only four responded. Of these four students, none were willing to participate in a follow-up interview later in their tutoring experiences. A follow-up interview may have determined that the schools and SYTE program had adopted a more coherent approach to supporting the students' instructional needs.

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