

PRESERVICE TEACHER FIELD TRIPS: OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE SCHOOLS IN HIGH-NEEDS CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This research study investigates the impact of having preservice teachers participate in a field trip to visit urban and diverse schools early in their preparation program. Through analysis of post-field trip survey responses, we found that the majority of participants reported a positive change in their perspectives on teaching in diverse and urban schools. Additionally, through coding of their open-ended responses, we identified key components of the experience that were impactful: opportunities to observe teaching and learning in a classroom setting; being exposed to a new, more diverse school context; and gaining knowledge about the innovative programs and job opportunities offered by the districts. Findings suggest that similar experiences such as school visits could positively impact preservice teachers' perceptions and have implications for teacher recruitment for diverse and urban schools.

Keywords: preservice teachers, field trips, high-needs contexts

Introduction

Teacher shortages are an important issue facing schools – especially in urban, high-needs districts (Ingersoll, 2003; Simon & Johnson, 2015). As school districts look to address these teacher shortages, many have been forced to expand their recruitment efforts beyond job postings and career fairs (O'Neil & Richards, 2018; Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006) and have resorted to raising teacher starting pay or offering other financial incentives, though the effectiveness of these methods is still in question (Liu, Johnson, & Peske, 2004). Partnerships with teacher preparation institutions could assist these districts in increasing access to a higher number of qualified candidates (Maier & Youngs, 2009), but preservice teacher (PST) attitudes towards working in high-needs schools are difficult to overcome (Hornig, 2009). Boyd and associates (2013) found that teachers largely preferred more suburban, more affluent, and less diverse settings that were located closer to their home. To increase the likelihood that PSTs might consider working in their schools, high-needs districts should consider providing opportunities for PSTs from local universities to experience teaching and learning in the context of their schools.

This study explores one such experience with PSTs from a large, public university in Central Texas and a nearby large, urban school district. We surveyed PSTs towards the beginning of their preparatory program, after they had the opportunity to visit schools in this district to observe students and teachers in classroom settings. The research questions guiding this study are:

- 1) Does a field trip experience to an urban, diverse school change PST perceptions on wanting to teach in similar settings?
- 2) What are the most meaningful aspects of a field trip experience for PSTs?

Literature Review

Teacher shortages are felt unevenly across school contexts, as schools with higher percentages of non-white students and low-income students have disproportionately more vacancies than their counterparts (Ingersoll, 2001; Simon & Johnson,

2015). These diverse and underserved schools are typically found in urban areas and often have higher rates of teacher turnover (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Rice, 2013). This turnover creates opportunities for novice educators seeking a place to begin their teaching careers. Unfortunately, many of these teachers who choose to take their first jobs in high-needs contexts will soon leave these schools in search for positions that more closely match their preferences (Jacob, 2007).

An important aspect of these PST preferences that is heavily influenced by both school context and geography is the demographic make-up of the student population. While the single largest group of teachers remains white and female, the national student population is growing more racially and ethnically diverse (Boser, 2014; Goodwin, 2017). Contributing to the phenomenon of teacher-student racial mismatch is the growing geographic segregation of American communities along ethnic lines (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). Consequently, it is becoming less likely for PSTs to have attended ethnically diverse schools and they may feel increasingly less comfortable teaching in the more diverse context of many high-needs schools. Since PSTs tend to prefer to work in schools with contexts similar to those they attended as PK-12 students (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005), school districts must find ways to overcome this teacher discomfort and their preference for schools that more closely align with their own educational experiences if they wish to recruit and retain their teachers at higher rates.

Some high-needs districts have sought to disrupt patterns of understaffing and low-retention by offering incentives to entice teachers into taking jobs at their schools, but the effectiveness of these measures has been unconvincing (Liu, Johnson, & Peske, 2004). Many hiring incentive programs offer monetary bonuses or student loan forgiveness (Aragon, 2018). However, such programs often do not significantly lessen the retention of teachers, which then leaves teacher turnover unaddressed (Berry, 2004; Fowler, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003). For example, Feng (2014) revealed that while raising teacher base pay could help to increase the likelihood of teachers remaining in their schools, the financial incentives of the amount necessary to address the problem of teacher attrition would be cost-prohibitive for many high-needs districts. Additional research has revealed that most monetary incentives are largely unproven in attracting high-quality teachers (McEwan, 1999; Milanowski et al., 2009). Additionally, teachers' financial considerations primarily impact their initial decision to enter the teaching profession, not which schools an educator might choose to teach (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). Therefore, if financial incentive programs are largely ineffective and prohibitively expensive, school districts should investigate alternative methods for attracting and then retaining qualified teachers.

An example of a non-financial method that can aide recruiting and subsequently retaining teachers is the formation of partnerships between teacher preparation institutions and school districts. As previously stated, these relationships can open pipelines of recruitment that can help fill teaching vacancies (Maier & Youngs, 2009). School districts partnered with teacher preparation institutions typically make their schools available as host sites for PST classroom observations, short-term practice teaching, or longer-term clinical teaching assignments. These formalized experiences are well-established aspects of many PST preparation programs, but some high-needs schools either lack partnerships with institutions or struggle to entice PSTs to choose their campuses as sites for those experiences. The establishment of less formal preservice experiences for PSTs might impact their comfort levels with the context of the high-needs schools. This increased comfort level should help PSTs feel more at home within the context of a high-need school, which could help to decrease teacher mobility (Liu & Johnson, 2006) and increase clinical teaching assignments on one of their campuses. Furthermore, PSTs can be more effective when their full-time teaching assignment matches the context of their clinical teaching assignment (Haberman & Post, 1998; Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2017). Therefore, since the location of clinical teaching assignments is impactful on their eventual full-time teaching assignment, it is critical for high-needs schools that PSTs experience the context of their schools early in their preservice preparation program.

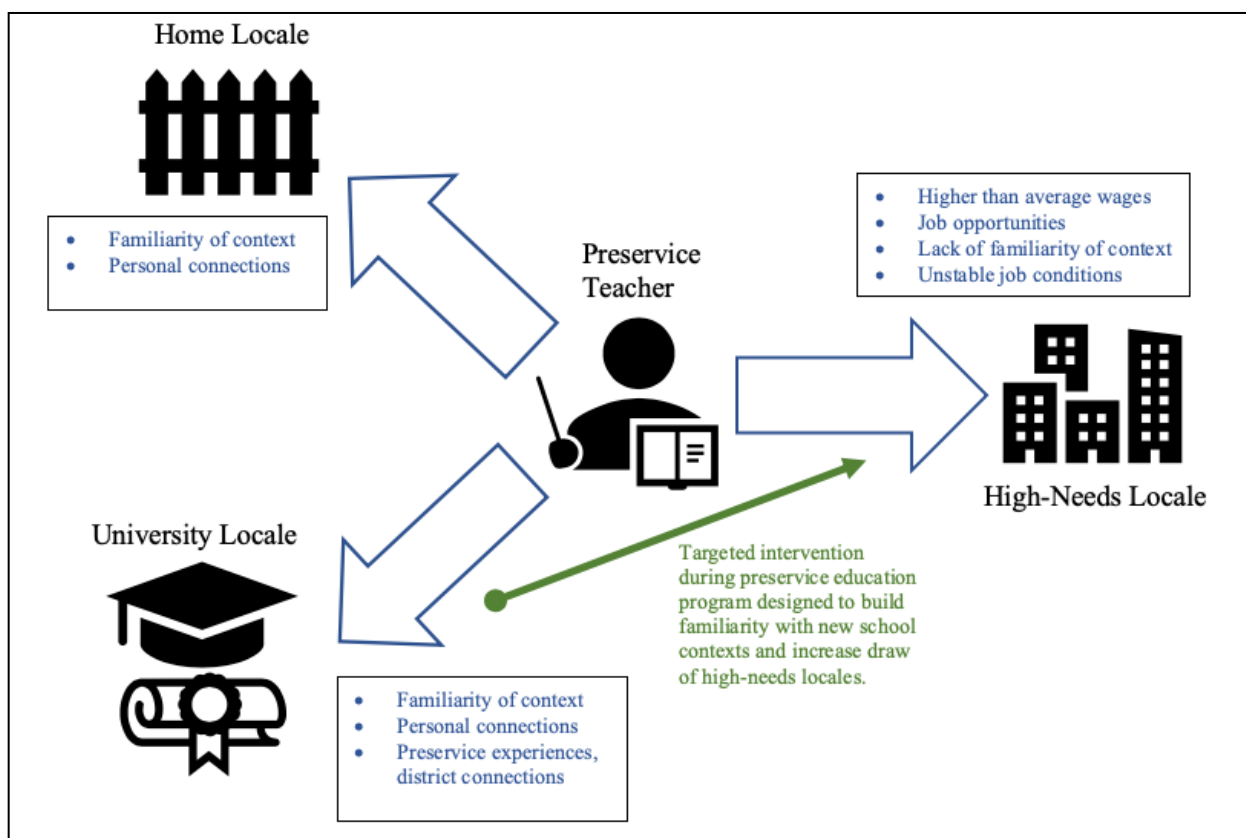
Conceptual Model

Experiential interventions that expose PSTs to new school contexts during their preservice education program have been shown to impact the way they view their profession and students (Lamote & Engles, 2010). This exposure could help teachers adjust more quickly to the context of their new school – and this enculturation process has been identified as one of the largest problems facing new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). With the learning curve for beginning teachers already incredibly steep, additional hurdles placed in the path of teachers, such as learning a new campus culture, can further burden these novices as they attempt to start their careers. Experiences designed to introduce PSTs to high-needs schools may not need to be long in duration to overcome unfamiliarity with the school context, as research has shown that the length of a clinical teaching experience is not a significant predictor of impact (Chambers & Hardy, 2005; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). Therefore, this study theorizes that allowing PSTs to experience teaching and learning in the contexts of a high-needs school early in their preservice preparation program might increase the likelihood that they would return to schools in a similar context for their

clinical or full-time teaching.

The following conceptual model is proposed to explain factors influencing the job decisions of a typical PST (Figure 1). The model situates the PST at the center of the frame presented with the choice of three primary locales in which to teach: 1) the home locale, 2) the locale surrounding the university they attended, or 3) the locale of a high-needs school. For the purpose of this model, the term “locale” refers to areas of similar geographic features such as urbanicity and physical setting; human aspects such as population racial and socioeconomic composition; and cultural aspects such as language and customs. PSTs’ choices of locale are presented as three large arrows linking the teacher in the center of the model with either their home locale, the university locale, or the locale of the urban school. Each of the three locales has certain factors that impact whether PSTs choose to work there and these are summarized below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Factors Affecting Teacher Job Choices



Home Locale. Home locales are appealing for PSTs because they often contain connections to friends and family members who may still reside in that geographic area. More generally, PSTs might be drawn to teach in a setting that contextually resembles their home locale. For example, PSTs tend to be interested in similarly sized and situated communities or communities with similar cultural aspects. When Boyd and associates (2013) examined PST school choices in New York, they uncovered that geographic distance from their hometown played a significant role in how teachers selected their schools. They discovered that the familiarity of the home locale is a powerful pull-factor for teachers and that their choices on where to teach were impacted by aspects of setting such as student demographics and urbanicity.

University Locale. The locale surrounding the university the PST attended was also found to be significantly important in choosing where to work, but less so than the home locale (Boyd et al., 2013). One additional benefit of the university setting is the presence of field experiences, which can build a sense of familiarity with particular school contexts and help PSTs feel more inclined to teach full-time in a similar context (Goldhaber et al., 2017).

High-needs locale. The locale of the high-needs school may not share many contextual similarities to that of the PSTs’ home or university, making it appear less attractive for a first teaching job. Typically, these high-needs schools feature student

populations that are less white and less affluent than their suburban or rural counterparts (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). While school districts in these locales do have numerous job opportunities for novice teachers with high starting pay rates (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007), these schools can be difficult to keep fully staffed (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010). Schools in urban settings have higher percentages of students of color and higher percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch assistance (Ng, 2003). They also often suffer from higher teacher turnover rates than their more affluent and less diverse suburban counterparts (Simon & Johnson, 2015). As a result, they must rely on new hires to fill their vacancies each school year. This staff instability can contribute to problems such as lower student achievement (Henry, Fortner, & Bastian, 2012) and poorly managed classrooms (Headden, 2014). These factors can create a very unstable work environment which fuels the cycle of novice replacement and additional teacher turnover.

Targeted Intervention. The last feature of the model is a targeted intervention, represented in Figure 1 by a smaller arrow bridging the space between the university and high-needs locales. This intervention introduces the PST to the locale of the high-needs school in hopes that they might choose to conduct their clinical teaching or teach full-time in schools within similar contexts. Due to the timing of these interventions prior to clinical teaching, they would most likely be short in duration and frequency, although it is hypothesized that increasing time spent in a high-needs context would have a greater effect on PST attitudes.

There are some PSTs who are familiar with the locales of the high-needs school and return to take jobs there, but they alone will not be sufficient to staff all of the open positions (Liu, Rosenstein, Swan, & Khalil, 2008). Surely, schools in these high-needs locales must seek to address their shortages of teachers in a multitude of ways. Grow-your-own teacher programs and the targeted recruitment of PSTs from the locales of the needy district (Milanowski et al., 2009) could prove to be partial remedies, but it is hypothesized that rerouting some of the teacher supply to high-needs districts through intervention experiences could be another promising solution. The study, as described below, incorporated a targeted intervention that might help increase the likelihood that PSTs might choose to clinical teach or full-time teach in a high-needs locale.

Methods

The department of teacher education at a large public university in Central Texas takes PSTs on a field trip to visit schools in a nearby large, urban school district. This experience is intended to help PSTs feel more open to the possibility of clinical teaching (which PSTs submit their preferences) or, upon graduation, teaching full-time for this school district. These field trips are taken once per semester by PSTs enrolled in a junior-level teaching methods course which is typically taken at the beginning of their certification program. The trip lasts the majority of one day with travel consisting of roughly three hours round-trip. Upon their arrival at the school sites, PSTs are given a guided tour of the campus and encouraged to spend time in classrooms observing teachers and students. Depending on the campus, PSTs are able to observe multiple classes of students and speak to several in-service teachers. They are also given a short presentation by campus administration which highlights district and campus programs and opportunities for future employment.

After the field trip, a short survey is distributed electronically to learn about PST perceptions of the school and the high needs school context as possible destinations for clinical and full-time teaching. Of the 225 students who received the survey link following their field trip in the spring of 2019, 68 students completed the survey. This response rate of 30 percent was not ideal, but robust enough to allow for preliminary analyses. The survey consisted of four items: one multi-part Likert-type scale question and three open-ended response questions meant to gather information about aspects of the trip they liked, did not like, or needed to be improved upon. The Likert-type scale item measured the effects of the field trip on PST perspectives about either clinical or full-time teaching in the participating school district or another district with a similar context. It was coded with 1 representing that the field trip definitely did not change their perspectives and 5 representing that the field trip definitely did change their perspectives.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the multiple-choice items and the open-ended questions were thematically coded. Qualitative analysis of the three open-ended response items yielded themes which were then used to code the responses for all three items (Merriam, 2009). Student responses were double-coded as needed.

Results

PST responses are summarized in Table 1. Affirmative responses were those indicating that the field trip “probably” or “definitely” did change their perspectives (4 or 5 on the Likert scale). With over 60 percent of participants indicating that the

field trip changed their perspective on teaching in an urban or diverse setting, data indicates that this experience shaped PST attitudes. Additionally, the experience of visiting the K-12 campuses had a greater impact on perspectives on teaching in a diverse setting than an urban setting. However, it is also clear that there was no substantial impact on perspectives about wanting to teach in a clinical or full-time capacity in the school district specifically.

Table 1

Summary of Responses to Survey Item Q1 (N=68)

Did the trip to the school campuses change your perspective about...	Percent of affirmative responses	Mean
...teaching in an urban setting?	62%	3.53
...teaching in a diverse setting?	71%	3.79
...clinical teaching in the district?	26%	2.44
...full-time teaching in the district?	22%	2.43

Participant responses to the open-ended survey questions were coded and then sorted into themes that emerged during the initial coding process (Saldana, 2015). Four major themes were retained and are listed in Table 2. For what participants liked about the field trip, respondents wrote positively about how the experience allowed them to observe teaching and student learning in actual classroom settings, provided them with a chance to see what a more diverse school setting looks like, and informed them of programs and opportunities offered to students and teachers in the district. In listing what they did not like about the field trip and suggesting how it be improved, the most common topic written about was regarding the trip transportation and other travel-related difficulties. Additionally, many students remarked that they would have liked to have spent more time observing teachers and students in the classrooms or have an opportunity to visit a different campus.

Table 2

Qualitative Themes from Open-Ended Response Survey Items Q2, Q3, and Q4

Theme	Frequency			Total (Percent)
	Q2: Likes	Q3: Dislikes	Q4: Suggestions	
Importance of time to observe students and teachers in a classroom setting.	28	12	14	54 (34%)
Seeing new or more diverse school environments.	19	6	11	36 (22%)
Informed about school programs and opportunities.	10	0	0	10 (6%)
Negative reactions to trip organization.	0	38	23	61 (38%)

PSTs valued their time in classrooms seeing teaching and learning happen and even asked for more observation time in many of their comments about suggested improvements. As one participant stated, "I liked that we got to spend several hours in the classroom with the students and teacher. The teacher also let us help the students while they were working!" (Respondent 5). Additionally, another participant said, "I liked how we were able to actually be in a classroom setting, even if it was just for a day!" (Respondent 11). PSTs appreciated the chance to see what classroom teaching and student learning looked like in these school contexts. Of the 161 coded statements drawn from the responses, over a third (34 percent) referenced time spent observing students and teachers in a classroom setting as an aspect of the trip for which they were thankful.

Participants also highlighted their appreciation for a chance to see a new and more diverse school setting on the field trip (36 statements, 22 percent). One PST said, "I liked getting to be immersed within a school that was so different than my personal experiences." (Respondent 14). As noted earlier, these PSTs largely come from schools much different than those found in urban school districts, so this field trip was a chance to introduce them to different contexts. For instance, one student said they appreciated "the experience of seeing a big school, because I'm from a small town." (Respondent 27).

Another goal of the field trip was to give the partner school district a chance to promote the variety of programs available to students and their teachers on their campuses. The impact of this new experience was impactful for PSTs as they widened their expectations for what schools could look like. Ten statements (6 percent) emphasized the power of these experiences. One PST spent time on a dual-language magnet campus and said, "I have nothing like this at home, so it was amazing to see this type of school." (Respondent 18). PSTs only know what they have seen and many of them have not experienced a great variety of school contexts.

The final emergent theme (61 statements, 38 percent) centered around structural problems with the trip such as the busses and the desire for a more clearly defined itinerary. Clearly length of travel, directions to participants, and accommodations were important to our PSTs. Their complaints can be taken under advisement and problems rectified to improve the quality of the experience. The shortcomings they pointed out should not take away from the positive impact made on the PSTs who were able to attend the field trip, but they do serve as a reminder that the structure of the field trip can be a help or a hindrance to participants having a positive experience and being able to focus on students and teachers in the schools they visited.

Discussion

As PSTs decide where to conduct their clinical and full-time teaching, they are often choosing between the familiar locales of home and university or the unfamiliar locale of the high-needs school. High-needs school districts have been exploring new and innovative methods for attracting teacher candidates, but methods of challenging teacher preferences for more familiar school contexts should also be explored. Targeted interventions such as the field trip presented here could be one way to increase PSTs' familiarity with these school contexts and increase the likelihood that they might later choose to work in high-needs schools. The field trip intervention explored in this study is an example of how partnerships between teacher preparation institutions and school districts can provide access to networks of teachers looking for jobs (Maier & Youngs, 2009).

PSTs indicated that the field trip experience positively changed their feelings about clinical or full-time teaching in an urban and diverse school. This suggests that experiences such as the field trip could help teacher recruitment efforts by increasing PST comfort with high-needs districts. That increased comfort level might lead to greater numbers of PSTs choosing to conduct their clinical teaching in similar contexts. This finding corresponds with research that indicates building familiarity with school context can increase the possibilities of teaching in schools of a similar context down the road (Goldhaber et al., 2017).

PSTs also indicated the importance of spending time to observe classrooms. They commented how this aspect of the experience was the most impactful and appreciated. These PSTs expressed a desire to observe a variety of classroom experiences, even those different than those they had experienced themselves as students. Exposing PSTs to classroom situations can be a powerful tool in helping them to develop an accurate concept of what teaching will entail (Anderson, Barksdale, & Hite, 2005), especially when supported by structures to guide their viewing of teaching and learning (Waxman, Rodriguez, Padron, & Knight, 1988). In attempting to better prepare PSTs for the challenges of teaching, teacher preparation institutions should seek to complement their course offerings with a diverse array of field experiences. Hosting these field experiences at high-needs schools can accomplish the double feat of helping to better prepare our PSTs and increase the likelihood that they will be comfortable teaching in the context of those campuses.

The attractiveness of teaching in the familiar locales similar to that of PSTs' home and university presents a challenge to urban, high-needs districts looking to hire and retain teachers for their diverse students. Partnerships between school districts and teacher preparation institutions should be encouraged and those that already exist should be utilized to help introduce PSTs to the context of high-needs schools. These introductions should precede clinical teaching placement in hopes that PSTs will consider returning to the high-needs locales for that critical experience in their preservice preparation program. Innovative experiential interventions such as the field trip presented here hold some promise for school districts and their teacher preparation institution partners as they attempt to meet the growing need for high-quality teachers in our diverse, urban schools.

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