

# **Stewarding Urban Teacher Education in Newark: In Search of Reflection, Responsibility, and Renewal**

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## **Introduction**

The driving force of the teacher education program at Montclair State University is the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) and its underlying commitment to preparing teachers who nurture and prepare their own students to responsibly participate in a social and political democracy (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). The fruits of simultaneous renewal at MSU over the past 10 years have yielded significant programmatic adjustments in its nationally acclaimed teacher education programs. Data collected from site partners, alumni, and faculty indicate a strong need for pre-service teachers to spend more time in the field prior to the student teaching experience.

In response to the data, MSU debuted in Fall 2007 a revised undergraduate professional sequence of courses with strategically embedded field experiences at partner school sites—increasing the time spent in an urban school (prior to student teaching) from 30 to a minimum of 120 hours. Fieldwork is critical in cementing the school-university partnership given that the school is the center of renewal work. It is also best pedagogical practice to embed field experiences in traditional stand-alone university coursework to ul-

timately prepare teachers for the opportunities and challenges of urban education. This article illuminates the joint stewardship of Montclair State University and Newark Public Schools through the undergraduate course, *Public Purposes of Education: Democracy and Schooling*. This course provides a microcosmic lens of simultaneous renewal of teacher education, K-12 schooling, and urban education.

### **In Search of the 3Rs**

Prior to admission into the teacher education program, MSU students are required to complete pre-requisite coursework in the historical and psychological foundations of education. Additionally, prospective teachers are required to take *Public Purposes of Education: Democracy and Schooling*, designed for understanding the institutional, cultural, ethical and political factors that affect, or may affect, democratic practice in schools (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997). The course requires students to complete a minimum of 30 hours of fieldwork within an urban school. Field experiences consist of an initial orientation meeting, a full day of shadowing an in-service teacher, attendance at two meetings, and the completion of at least 10 hours of community service. Taken together, these field experiences serve to contextualize and catalyze exploration of broader issues related to schooling in a democracy. As a framework for inquiry, students rely on the dimensions of teaching for democracy established by the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED) as part of the National Network for Educational Renewal. The AED provides the focus and shared vision that binds MSU faculty members in education and the arts and sciences with the public schools in the common work of ethical, effective, and morally grounded urban teacher education (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). The Agenda also provides the lens for analyzing field-based observations through MSU's *Portrait of a Teacher* that provides a common language and set of standards for discussing the teaching profession (see <http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/cop/about.shtml#portrait>). For most students, the course affords the first in-school experience from the "other side of the desk" and for many

it is a first experience inside an urban school setting. Following successful completion of the course, MSU students are then eligible to apply for admission into the teacher education program. Three interrelated goals comprise the *Public Purposes* course:

- To expose pre-service teachers to a wide spectrum of successes and challenges comprising urban education and the teaching profession in general;
- To provide pre-service teachers with an initial field experience in an urban school setting;
- To prepare students for admission into the teacher education program requiring both a written essay and oral interview that illustrates the applicant's understanding and ability to identify AED principles as reflected in MSU's *Portrait of a Teacher*.

Navigating fieldwork in the *Public Purposes of Education* course is crucial to the development of new teachers and more broadly to urban educational renewal. The coordination of fieldwork is accomplished collaboratively through MSU and the Montclair State University Network for Educational Renewal (MSUNER). Approximately 1000 teachers from MSUNER schools serve on committees and task forces as clinical faculty at MSU adding valuable input into the renewal and development of college curriculum. MSUNER co-facilitates partnerships with more than 26 school districts in Northern New Jersey, including three of the largest urban districts in the state. MSUNER places students enrolled in each *Public Purposes* section in a designated urban school site that is part of an existing *Partnership for Instructional Excellence for Educational Quality* (PIE-Q)—an initiative of the Newark Public Schools, Newark Teachers Union, and MSU.

This article is based on two sections of the *Public Purposes of Education* course placed within First Avenue School (FAS)—a Pre-K through 8th grade school first established in 1928 in the North Ward of Newark. More than 60 percent of the population of New-

ark's North Ward is of Hispanic descent and for this segment of the student population at FAS, Spanish is the primary language spoken at home. Although the poverty rate in the North Ward has declined by more than 10 percent over the past decade (equal to the decline in the city as a whole) the median household income in Newark is still less than half of that at the state level. The percentage of children living in poverty in Newark is triple that of statewide figures. In a much needed move to ease overcrowding, FAS relocated in 2007 to a newly constructed building that houses 125 staff and a student body of more than 1200, including populations of special needs, autistic, and bilingual students. The FAS teachers who interface with MSU students include staff members with various connections to MSU (such as matriculated graduate students, participants in grant-funded critical inquiry projects, adjunct clinical faculty members, etc.) and are led by a designated teacher liaison from within FAS.

In framing this joint stewardship of the *Public Purposes* course and its larger role in fostering the school-university partnership and renewing teacher education, this article addresses the following key questions:

- What specifically do we want students to *reflect* upon during this field-based course?
- What are our individual and collective *responsibilities* during this field-based course?
- How do we respond to the emergent challenges of simultaneous educational *renewal*?

In the discussions that follow we identify and discuss specific learning outcomes, locate the shared responsibilities of MSU students and FAS staff, and tease out the emergent challenges and possibilities of simultaneous urban educational renewal.

### **A Stewardship of Reflection**

The *Public Purposes* course assumes that preparing undergraduate students to experience an urban school setting requires an initial examination of the public purposes of education and the various

forces that shape the development of schools in the United States. Throughout the semester students engage in critical questioning, problem posing, and problem solving regarding teaching practices, school organization, and educational policy through textual analyses, ethnographic inquiry, and field observation. In the university classroom, students are encouraged to reflect upon questions such as, “How do politics play a role in education?” and “Can the public schools produce good citizens?” and “Should the curriculum be standardized for all?”

Twenty percent of in-class time at the university is spent in a “weekly download” where field observations can be shared, questioned, collectively discussed, and (to a certain extent) understood. Students engage in theoretical discussions about the political, economic, and social definitions of *democracy*. They explore the collision of the bureaucratic realities of schooling with the democratic ideals of education by identifying federal, state, and local levels of governance. They learn about school law and finance, the role of families, and how these structures impact students with special learning needs and teaching as a profession. Students also discuss current issues such as national and state standards, testing, and ponder such questions as, “Can federal initiatives such as *No Child Left Behind* rescue failing schools?” Class discussions also challenge the bureaucratic structures associated with accountability and high-stakes testing and their impact on the learning environment.

To contrast the bureaucratic constraints and realities of urban education, students explore from a democratic standpoint how they might ultimately serve the increasingly diverse populations of students comprising schooling in the United States. They discuss tough questions, such as “What is worth teaching?” and “What is worth learning?” and “What does it mean to be a good teacher?” (see *Portrait of a Teacher* at <http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/cop/about.shtml#portrait>). Students read about past, present, and future demographics of United States school populations and what it reveals about current cultural, linguistic, and legal challenges facing public education. Students deconstruct mass media messages about schooling, with a particular emphasis on news media cover-

age of violence in Newark schools. To earn credit for the course, students complete a progression of assignments and activities that build upon one another to ultimately transform their understanding about schooling within a social and political democracy. On a more practical level, students review relevant policies and practices of the teacher education program at Montclair State University and discover the bureaucratic procedures of submitting to a background check, successfully completing the Praxis exam, obtaining health tests, and paying application fees.

Navigating the *Public Purposes* course requires a careful balance of exciting future teachers about the teaching profession while also exposing them to the real challenges of urban education. This involves training students at the university to think like researchers and to gather data in the form of field observations (Posner, 2004). Theoretical discussions at the university take on practical significance as students simultaneously navigate fieldwork in conjunction with their course work at the university, as discussed later in the next section. An online component serves as a bridge between university work and experiences in the field. Students are required to maintain an academic blog (or web log) for the course during the semester. A blog serves as an online journal where the students can express their understanding, raise questions, and share their discoveries of their initial experiences of urban schooling. Students' blog entries serve as evidence of this connection and transformative learning across aspects of the reading, class discussion, current events, their own personal experiences and what they observe and experience during their fieldwork at FAS.

The blog serves less as a mechanism for social networking and more as a facilitator of individual students' understanding of the public purposes of education. Students' blogs are assessed at the end of the course as individual and cumulative bodies of work—which motivates them to add, change, and/or delete any blog content up until the final day of the semester and to emphasize reflective thinking. The criteria for evaluating students' blogs are based on the six "Cs:" Comprehension of ideas; Connection of ideas; Clarity of written communication; Conventional expression; Consistency;

and Communal contribution. The goal of this pedagogical design is to mirror a professional learning community for these prospective teachers as they seek to initially understand, identify, and reflect upon AED principles within the *Portrait of a Teacher*.

### **A Stewardship of Responsibility**

From a pedagogical standpoint, the deep reflection that occurs in the university classroom is not possible without students living urban education firsthand through fieldwork. For an MSU student, living both in the Newark Public Schools community and in the university classroom requires strategic navigation of a tight schedule—which usually includes a full course load and one or two part-time jobs. With the exception of the initial orientation meeting, MSU students are fully responsible for scheduling, completing, and providing evidence for the completion of their fieldwork. This section outlines the nature of the responsibilities of the school-university partnership and the technological as well as pedagogical structures that enable both sides to meet those responsibilities.

### ***Field Experience #1: Orientation and Teacher Shadow***

To introduce MSU students into their field setting and prepare them to complete fieldwork, key FAS staff members facilitate a 2-hour orientation session within the library media center while school is in session. The principal and vice principal welcome MSU students and faculty and offer a brief history of Newark Public Schools and the unique characteristics of FAS. The mandatory orientation session brings together MSU students and faculty along with FAS students and faculty to establish a common frame of reference and set of procedures. FAS staff members provide MSU students with a new teacher handbook, school policies, report card assessment, and an organizational chart. FAS representatives, such as a parent liaison, bilingual and special education teachers, specialists from the activity (art/music/physical education) fields, child study team members, and teachers with years of experience (ranging from pre-service to the most veteran on staff) conduct a round-robin activity to inform students about the many roles and responsibilities

associated with urban schooling. Each MSU student receives contact information for the teacher to whom they are assigned to shadow for one full school day. Since the function of the *Public Purposes* course is to provide MSU students with a broad perspective of schooling, the shadow assignments are not necessarily within the same content area as the student's major. The orientation session also includes a tour of the state-of-the-art school building with FAS students (in full school uniform) serving as guides. During the tour, MSU students stop by their shadow teacher's classroom for face-to-face introductions and scheduling of their shadow day. While the orientation session does (on a small scale) interrupt the flow of the school day and classroom instruction, the two-hour session is essential for laying the groundwork for successful student completion of fieldwork. The challenge is to minimize intrusiveness while at the same time ensuring that FAS can accommodate on-site participation of 60 undergraduate students.

To prepare the MSU students for completing a full day of shadowing, the university instructor demonstrates for them how to collect observational data in the field and informs them of their responsibility to identify and delineate observational data, preliminary interpretations, and to track their emotional responses during their field experience (Posner, 2004). The individual student returns to FAS and follows his or her assigned teacher throughout the day, carefully observing and taking notes. The student neither teaches nor assists in the classroom. However, reciprocity ensues when students complete their 10 hours of community service.

### ***Field Experience #2: Community Service***

The community service aspect of fieldwork is much more than a course requirement; it is a source of support for FAS and the Newark Public Schools. *The Public Purposes* course provides FAS staff with 600 hours of service and support. Community *service* consists of students engaging in activities driven by the felt needs identified by FAS teachers. MSU students lend support in a variety of ways—helping operate the Media Center, assisting in circulation and shelving of materials, and providing individualized instrumental lessons



for fledgling musicians. Bilingual undergraduates provide conversational practice for English-language learners. MSU students create bulletin boards, assist with the annual Book Fair, and spend time beyond the school day with students at the Citizens' Schools and in the After School Youth Development Programs. Field Day, an annual recreation day in a local park, would not be possible without the concentrated effort of MSU students who facilitate games and activities for more than 600 students a day. As part of their community service, MSU students recently created a school-wide publicity campaign of posters with age-appropriate celebrity endorsements of FAS school uniforms.

The community service requirement is the most difficult for MSU students to complete, as it relies upon the felt need of the teachers and staff *and their ability to communicate those needs* to MSU students. To facilitate the communication of felt needs and service opportunities, the school-university liaisons created an on-line calendar to fuse the responsibilities of MSU students and the felt needs of FAS teachers. The calendar is public in the sense that it is openly accessible on the web for all teachers and MSU students to view. However, modifications require a password only accessible to FAS teachers and the school-university liaisons. FAS teachers are instructed in how to post a service opportunity and to include their contact information in hopes that an MSU student will seize the opportunity and initiate contact. In addition, the *Public Purposes* course web site (housed on university Blackboard servers) also provides a web-based calendar that communicates the university class schedule, school site events (including faculty and district meetings), Newark holidays, and specific community service opportunities posted by FAS teachers. In this way, the online calendar serves as a continuous window to community service opportunities.

### ***Field Experience #3: Meeting attendance***

The most flexible of the three required field experiences is attendance at two meetings. MSU students choose the time, date, and nature of the meetings—which can range from a one-hour monthly faculty meeting in the FAS auditorium to a bi-weekly district advi-

sory board meeting that lasts several hours into the evening. MSU students can also choose (with FAS approval) to attend parent-teacher organization meetings and staff development meetings. Not surprisingly, there is an abundance of school-based meetings from which MSU student can choose. The goal is for these prospective teachers to experience education from a broad view and from a perspective other than their own as a student. Additionally, students learn that education and schooling encompass more than just the formal classroom curriculum.

### **A Stewardship of Renewal and Change**

The school-university partnership as enacted through this course benefits MSU students through the provision of field-based and reflective experiences that transform learning about the public purposes of education. Over the course of the semester, while students theorize at the university while at the same time observing in the field, they are able to draw critical connections across the democratic ideals and bureaucratic constraints of urban education. Students ultimately arrive at the question: “If/how should public schooling be redefined?” As part of this conversation, students distinguish between *reform* and *renewal*. Some questions they consider include: Does the business world belong in education? What role does technology play in redefining the processes and products of schooling? In the classroom, how can pedagogies such as inclusion and differentiated instruction provide everyone with access to knowledge?

Moral capacity among FAS teachers increases along with their active participation. Hosting a shadowing student for the day is a way that FAS teachers can give back to the teaching profession. Not every teacher is willing, or able, to commit to the full-year rigors of being a cooperating mentor to a student teacher; however, data show that 95 percent of FAS staff regularly participate as shadow teachers for the *Public Purposes* class. Our data collection will widen in scope as we seek to locate the nature and amount of support resulting from the 600 hours of community service allotted to FAS as part of this school-university partnership.

Although the *Public Purposes* course is a pre-requisite for students seeking teacher certification at the secondary level, there have been a handful of students who subsequently chose to seek licensure at the elementary level—an unintended consequential benefit to FAS. The assumption of the school-university partnership is that an open door at FAS will ultimately open a mind of a future teacher. The school-university partnership allows for transparency in everyday processes at FAS. MSU students have access to all school meetings and lessons and to all classrooms and teachers. Although FAS cannot represent the authentic experience of every Newark school, it demonstrates the possibilities of urban education. This open access and richness of experience validate the purpose and scope of the course.

Ultimately, the *Public Purposes* course benefits FAS students who have come to expect that MSU students will visit their classrooms and come to their after-school programs. Combined with a large cohort of student teachers also in the building, PK-8 students are constantly surrounded by role models who reinforce the importance and attainability of college education. This familiarity is the first step in achieving one of the Newark Public Schools Goals for 2013 to “prepare students for college, work, and citizenship” (see <http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/pdf/StrategicPlan-FINALEXECUTIVESUMMARY11-09.pdf>). Pre-service teachers are part of a bigger community, a community of learning, and influence. Students come to see that what happens in their classroom is valued by others as a model, and that the expertise of their teachers is sought after. Likewise, seeing college students appreciate the teaching field cultivates interest in urban education as a potential career choice.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The *Public Purposes* course benefits MSU students through the affordance of contextualizing and operationally defining AED principles through an initial lived experience in an urban school. At the same time, preparing MSU students to observe in the field is

complex and arduous. Students enter the course with fearful assumptions about urban education and the perils of doing fieldwork in Newark—based on media constructions of Newark schools as violent places. To help these students untangle what they assume and interpret from what they actually observe in the field requires more in-class discussion and engagement than this field-embedded course currently allows. However, to reduce time spent in the field would compromise the search for the public purposes of (urban) education in a democracy.

The community service component is a strong motivational factor for inviting undergraduate students into the complex and challenging environment of FAS. Yet it is rife with tensions and challenges. School leadership changes, pressures associated with NCLB and standardized testing, and the sheer size of the Newark Public School District all create bureaucratic challenges that resist the presence of MSU students at FAS as more of an intrusion rather than as a source of support. On the other hand, for the FAS teachers, the “outside” source of support from MSU students provides an outlet and inlet that is impacted less by local school culture than other attempts at renewal. An additional layer of challenge is matching teacher needs during the school day with the tight schedule of MSU students, who engage in other university coursework during school hours. A continuous goal for this school-university partnership is to magnify the community service component to the ultimate benefit of FAS teachers, yet balancing it with realistic expectations for these undergraduate students who are still deciding whether or not to pursue teaching as their chosen profession.

To ask FAS teachers to identify their felt needs and articulate those needs to undergraduate students over the course of a semester is a daunting task. Scheduling the community service fieldwork is simplified through the use of a web-based calendar that allows for online scheduling of community service opportunities and sign-ups. FAS teachers post days and times at which they need on-site support and students respond directly to the teacher. While this technology connects the teacher and student, it assumes that teachers can identify their felt needs, use the technology, and do so in a way that

allows for MSU students to respond in a timely manner. The FAS liaison demonstrates for teachers the uses of the web-based calendar; however, the teachers who may not want to publicize their felt needs or do not recognize the need for assistance until the eleventh hour are marginalized in this process. Community service projects that are singular in focus yet allow large groups of students to participate (i.e., Field Day or dress code campaign) allow for the possibility of packaging the community service requirement as a single collective effort each semester to provide more time flexibility for students. In moving forward, the school-university liaisons will together examine data extracted from the online calendar to formatively and summatively evaluate the nature and extent of community service support of the FAS community. The ultimate aim is to work together to find a balance at which technology can facilitate (rather than impede) educational renewal and facilitate school-university partnership.

From a macro perspective, *Public Purposes of Education* serves as a professional learning community for FAS staff and MSU students—to bridge the gaps between urban teacher education and the communities in which they serve. Ultimately the course brings students to the intersection where the democratic ideals of education collide with the bureaucratic constraints of public schooling. The teaching profession is then reframed as a skillful navigation of bureaucracy and democracy rather than as an uphill battle to reform urban education. For those students who possess the dispositions outlined in the *Portrait of a Teacher* and the conviction that *all* students can learn, the course provides a set of field experiences and a common language with which to speak (and write) about democratic practices in education (Soder, 2001). Moving forward, this area of inquiry yields itself to useful data mining of teacher education admission acceptance rates, the frequency in which individual students (who have successfully completed the *Public Purposes* course) petition to student teach in an urban setting, and/or those graduates who ultimately accept teaching positions within Newark Public Schools. For those students who do not subscribe to AED principles or aspire to the standards in the *Portrait of a Teacher*, the

*Public Purposes* serves a gate keeping function for urban teacher education as it catalyzes such knowledge *prior* to students investing in the rigorous teacher education application and admission process.

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