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Investigating Teacher Candidates' Mentoring of Students At Risk of Academic Failure: A Canadian Experiential Field Model

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In this study, the authors explore a Canadian field experience model in a bachelor of education program that focuses on mentor-based relationships between teacher candidates and students at risk of dropping out of high school. They examine teacher candidates' and at-risk students' attitudinal approaches. The model emphasizes praxis and social justice, and the authors argue that it would benefit from a greater emphasis on critical literacy theory. Data were collected through triangulation of Ministry of Education documents, a literature review, program coordinators' informal reflections and field notes, and interviews. Interview participants were two teacher candidates, three at-risk students, and three Student Success teachers. The mentoring improved human relations and attendance more than grades for the at-risk students. The results indicate that at-risk students feel individually empowered through the mentor-based model and teacher candidates demonstrate insights into their mentoring relationships.

Keywords: critical literacy, mentoring, field experience model, teacher candidates, at-risk high school students

In this study, we explore a Canadian field experience in the faculty of education at the University of Windsor, Ontario, that focuses on mentor-based relationships. The model provides teacher candidates with extensive opportunities to mentor at-risk students in academic, outdoor, and community settings. We use Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens's (2005) definition of high-risk youth: "One who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and relationships." (p. 4) We further characterize our definition of *at-risk youth*, a term we used throughout, as described by Schonert-Reichl (2000) who notes that risk fluctuates over time based on circumstances and contexts, rather than being a fixed quality. Moreover, for at-risk youth, exposure to multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of problematic outcomes, and the impact of exposure to risk factors at a young

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age may be more detrimental than exposure later in life (2000). Using a mentor-based model, teacher candidates grapple with theory and practice to consider the power dynamics framing their work with at-risk students.

The following questions guided this study:

- Are teacher candidates' attitudinal approaches to engaging with at-risk high school students affected by a field experience model that emphasizes praxis and social justice?
- Do at-risk students respond well to a mentorship model, which gives them multiple opportunities to develop relationships with adult mentors in social, outdoor, and academic settings?

Data were collected through triangulation of Ministry of Education documents and a literature review, program coordinators' informal reflections and field notes, and interviews. The results of this study indicate that at-risk students feel individually empowered through the mentorship model. They showed improvement in terms of attendance and general engagement; however, mentoring in this study did not significantly affect grades.

Herein we discuss the results of a small-scale qualitative study that draws upon eight interviews. Study participants included ninth-grade at-risk students, faculty of education teacher candidates in a one-year consecutive program (all of them held at least an undergraduate degree), and Student Success teachers hired specifically to work with at-risk students in the high school system. We explore the benefits and challenges of a mentor-based field experience model and discuss the potential for learning through mentorship and in community contexts. In particular, we examine how this mentor-based model affects the attitudinal approaches of teacher candidates engaging with at-risk students. We consider the impact on at-risk learners and conclude with suggestions for further empirical research on mentor-based field experience models.

The LEAD Field Experience Model

The LEAD (Leadership Experience for Academic Directions) field experience model was created in 2005 in Windsor, Canada. It correlates with the Ontario Ministry of Education Student Success program. The latter attempts to reduce the high provincial dropout rate of secondary-level students (40% within the four-year graduation period and 30% within a five-year graduation period). King's (2005) report shows that since 2000, there has been a substantial decrease in the number of high school graduations in Ontario—as many as one quarter of the students will not graduate. There is one Student Success teacher at every high school whose mandate is to implement the Ontario Ministry's program such as transition plans from eighth to ninth grade, cooperative options, and credit recovery (which allows students to revisit failed

courses with the aim of completion rather than starting anew). The Ministry's goal is to reach a graduation target of 85% by 2010. The Student Success teachers in Windsor play a key role in delivering the LEAD field experience model.

Student Success teachers mentor LEAD teacher candidates assigned to the credit recovery, learning skills, and cooperative courses. Unlike traditional field placement models, LEAD teacher candidates do all their placements in the same high school to foster long-term, mentor-based relations with students.

LEAD teacher candidates take part in a three-day leadership-focused outdoor education trip and participate in monthly social events outside class time such as bowling and community service. Throughout the year, the LEAD teacher candidates organize these community events with university faculty members as a resource.

These teacher candidates take a course specifically designed for this field experience. It provides them with a theoretical framework to better understand social justice issues in education. The field experience and the service learning projects the teacher candidates develop are based on theories of resiliency (Werner, 1996), social learning (Bandura, 1977, 1997), social and personal responsibility (Hellison, 2003), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Werner defines *resilience* as a set of qualities that help one adapt and achieve positive outcomes despite risk and adversity. Bandura's (1977, 1997) social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of reciprocal interaction among cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. Hellison's (2003) social and personal responsibility model encourages students to apply positive social behavior through such activities as group discussion, goal setting, and reflection. Communities of practice have their origin in learning theory. According to Wenger (1999), this theory seeks to understand both the structure of communities and how learning occurs in them—and it is the underlying principle of the LEAD field experience model. University professors structure learning opportunities to embed theoretical knowledge in both the classroom and field experience. This, according to Wenger, creates opportunities for students to solve real problems with adults in real learning situations.

Social Justice Education

Lucas (2005) observes that it is not enough to simply place teacher candidates in diverse school settings. They require a theoretical lens to challenge their own preconceptions. These stereotypes can potentially become more thoroughly entrenched rather than examined if not given the proper guidance from experienced social justice educators to understand individual experiences in societal contexts. Issues of poverty and class are complex and intersect with many other factors such as gender, race, and ability that determine an individual's response to systemic barriers or supports. We think the LEAD program

has the potential to illuminate Freire's (1970) concept of praxis: the engagement of theory and practice. In this case, critical literacy as praxis involves understanding and implementing social justice education and creating greater awareness of the power issues at hand. The development of critical literacies, such as those that Shor and Parri (1999), Luke and Freebody (1997), and McLaren (2002) address, may be fostered among teacher candidates. It challenges them to think about their emerging identities as educators and how this work is located in complex social, political, and cultural contexts.

Critical literacy is a theory that is broadly defined. For purposes of this article, we define it as a literacy that goes beyond the mechanics of learning to read and write. Instead, it invites critical reflection of social justice issues that takes into account larger, systemic problems. Educators have to critique the system they live and work in to find better ways to address inequities through thoughtful analyses and direct action (Shor & Parri, 1999).

Literature Review

Much of the existing research on social justice education shows that more work needs to be done to examine the attitudes of teacher candidates and at-risk students involved in a mentor-based model that moves away from a custodial approach. Ferguson et al. (2005), King (2005), Sibthorp (2003), Simmons-Morton, Davis Crump, Haynie, and Saylor (1999), and Smink and Schargel (2004) focus on the failures that cause at-risk students to leave school early, or what at-risk students think about school, rather than on what will succeed. Many teacher candidates, coming from middle-class backgrounds, feel unprepared to work with at-risk urban youth. Drawing on the research of Phillips, Voran, Kisker, Howes, and Whitebrook (1994) and Stage and Quiroz (1997), Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Stoolmiller (2008) observe, "It seems that children who are at the highest risk are often taught by teachers who are the least prepared to handle challenging behavior; teachers serving predominantly low-income children use more harsh, detached, and ineffective teaching strategies than those teaching middle-income children." (p. 472)

Teacher candidates need to move beyond a reductionist stance and see that "classism," as identified by Gorski (2008), is inherent in the ways we institutionalize poverty. To understand disadvantaged students, educators need to understand poverty and classism in society and schools (Gans, 1996). Gorski (2008) notes that, in education, "this is the hallmark of deficit theory—the suggestion that we address poverty by fixing poor people instead of eradicating classism." (p. 139) Cheney, Blum, and Walker (2004), in a quantitative study of the Beacon community centers and Positive Behavior Support models, working to implement across-the-school measures to improve the chances of at-risk youth, found that "the domains of this model change the scale of practices from the individual to the classroom, school, family, and community." (p. 9) The Beacon community centers program, similar to

LEAD, advocates that teachers require institutional support to increase opportunities for and improve relations with at-risk students. McDonald (2005) found that programs intent on integrating social justice into teacher education were more successful in theory than practice.

Researchers conducting evaluations of mentoring programs assert the complexity of this research (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Studies have found no significant differences in key performance indicators due to mentorship, but some have demonstrated differences in at-risk students' holistic behaviors. Slicker and Palmer (1993) studied the effectiveness of pairing a mentor with adolescents deemed at-risk for school dropout. They compared 32 mentored, at-risk 10th-grade students with 32 at-risk students without a mentor. Following a six-month intervention period, there were no significant differences in dropout rates between the two groups. However, there was a significant difference in self-concept scores favoring the control group. In one of the largest studies in mentoring (Tierney & Grossman, 1995) 959 youth were randomly assigned to one of two groups: a mentoring group (Big Brothers, Big Sisters) or a control group (the latter youth were put on the 18-month waiting list). The results indicated that mentees who met with their mentors regularly for about a year were 46% less likely than the control group to start using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to start drinking, 52% less likely to skip a day of school, and 37% less likely to skip a class. In a meta-analysis of 55 evaluations, Dubois et al.'s (2002) findings demonstrated few benefits of program participation. According to these researchers, relationship and contextual factors need to be more thoroughly considered.

In 2004, the Ontario Ministry of Education, introduced the Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) Strategy, requiring all students in Ontario to remain in school until graduation or 18 years of age whichever comes first. In this Ministry strategy, all secondary schools in Ontario were to have a teacher designated to student success so that most or all of their schedule dealt with issues of student success and students at-risk of not graduating. Five key goals were articulated for the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy (SS/L18):

(1) increase graduation rate and decrease dropout rate;
(2) support a good outcome for all students;
(3) provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities;
(4) build on students' strengths and interests; and
(5) provide students with an effective elementary to secondary school transition (as cited in Ungerleider, 2008).

Ungerleider was commissioned to evaluate the SS/L18 strategies implemented across the province. Both quantitative (key performance indicators) and qualitative studies were conducted. More than 300 interviews were

conducted in 53 schools across the province. In this report for the Canadian Council on Learning, Ungerleider (2008) found that the benefits most frequently reported by school and school board informants were classified as human-related benefits, including improved internal communication within schools, increased student engagement, and improved teaching practices. Human-related benefits signal changes in teaching practices, ensuring there is a caring adult who is a consistent role model for the youth.

Further, Ungerleider (2008) found that the challenges most frequently reported during field visits were also human-related challenges, including staff perceptions and student dispositions, the needs of specific student subpopulations (especially students with persistent or marked behavioral difficulties), and inadequate or underdeveloped pedagogy in specific areas of practice. Similarly, in the LEAD field experience model, at-risk students' holistic behavior has improved, but key school indicators have not significantly improved.

Methods

Site

This study took place in Windsor, which has certain characteristics that may be beneficial for the research of at-risk students. First, Windsor has been identified through Canadian census data as the fastest-growing community in Ontario after Toronto. This population growth is due to immigration, not birth (Statistics Canada, 2006). Between 1996 and 2001, the number of immigrants in Windsor increased from 28,050 to 50,020 (Statistics Canada, 2003), resulting in the fourth-largest foreign-born population in Canada. Second, among the at-risk population in the area's secondary schools, a high percentage is English-language learners (Coelho, 2004) of low socioeconomic status. Third, 16.1% of individuals less than 18 years old live in poverty in Windsor, which translates to 23,000 people out of a population of 200,000 (Statistics Canada, 2006). The research took place in the Greater Essex County District School Board, with participants from two urban schools with the greatest at-risk youth population.

Participants

For this small-scale study, we randomly choose participants representative of the full field experience model. Out of the 24 teacher candidates who went to camp at the beginning of the year, there were 18 from whom to choose. A third party, unrelated to the research, selected participants' names from a hat for the categories of teacher candidates and at-risk students. Potential participants were contacted via email. Student Success teachers were chosen based on where the interviewed teacher candidates did their placements. One teacher candidate who initially agreed to participate later dropped out for personal

reasons, so only two participants were interviewed in the teacher candidate category. In total, three at-risk students and three Student Success teachers were interviewed. The at-risk students included two boys and one girl (all 14 years of age).

A large majority of Windsor at-risk students are White, marginalized youth living in low socioeconomic communities. Others are from multicultural backgrounds where English is not spoken in the home. The Student Success teachers were two females and one male in their mid-30s, all with more than five years' teaching experience and of White middle-class backgrounds.

Data Collection

Initially, we conducted a content analysis of related government, school board, and university literature and policy documents. Research included mentorship, social justice education, at-risk student populations, and critical literacy. A total of eight qualitative interviews with participants from the three main populations (two teacher candidates, three at-risk students, and three Student Success teachers) took place in April and May 2009. The interviews were conducted at the researchers' offices on campus or at the schools. Teacher candidates had completed their bachelor of education program when interviewed. The at-risk students were in high school and still participating in LEAD. The one-hour open-ended interviews were transcribed, reviewed several times, and coded thematically.

Data Analysis

The overarching research questions were:

- Are teacher candidates' attitudinal approaches to engaging with at-risk students affected by this field experience model?
- Do at-risk students respond well to this mentorship model, which gives them multiple opportunities to develop relationships with adult mentors in social, outdoor, and academic settings?

We took a constructivist knowledge approach to the interviews. The strategy of our research design uses grounded theory, which Creswell (2003) describes as researchers who "work inductively to generate theories strictly from the data." (p. 96) Our research methods included semi-structured interviews. In a sense, the questions suggest some of the themes we suspected might emerge from the interviews. We used questions such as, "What are your impressions of the LEAD program so far?" However, it was our intention in *not* defining preliminary categories to let the organization of themes emerge once the data was collected. Drawing upon the concept of grounded theory (Glaser, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kirby & McKenna,

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1989) through a careful reading and rereading of transcripts, points were organized into four main thematic categories that are explored in the "Findings" section.

In using this form of in-depth interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2008**),** we attained data about the participants' thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, and feelings about their experience. By allowing for the interviews to include spontaneous questions that arose out of the discussion, there was a greater chance that they would yield insights that truly reflected the experiences of the participants. Creswell (2003) observes that in semi-structured interviews using an emerging methodology, "the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons." (p. 8) Through interviews, we gain greater insight into how individuals cope with larger institutional mechanisms, recognizing that all life experiences are "inherently political and deeply embedded in power." (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 544)

Interviews employ the complexity of personal narratives to examine the impetus for students to succeed or struggle. Ferguson et al. (2005) comment on the nuances of interviewing at-risk youth:

> Young people's accounts of becoming disengaged with school were non-linear, partial, and fragmented. They described their experiences in a "back and forth" manner—the past, present and even the future were inextricably intertwined in their experiences. There were no simple constructions of the phenomenon of "dropping out." (p. 20)

Similarly, the at-risk students interviewed in our study kept circling back to major points about their changing perspectives and learning experiences. However, they often made their most articulate statements in the midst of recalling what might otherwise seem like a small incident.

As we read the literature review, the coded interview transcripts, ministry documents, and notes from conversations with the program coordinators (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), each of these data sources permeated our understanding and interpretations of the effects of mentorship on the teacher candidates and students. These sources of data were examined in relation to each of the four themes that emerged. Key performance indicators, including number of credits accumulated and absenteeism (collected by the school board/analyzed by us), were examined. However, because this data was collected only over the first semester, the results were limited. The findings between this group of at-risk students participating in LEAD and a control group of the same population (at-risk students) who did not participate in the program showed that LEAD students were not performing as well as the control group. However, this point must be contextualized in that the LEAD students were initially chosen because they were more at risk than any of the students in the control group.

Findings

In this section we present four distinct themes from the interviews. The themes are described in detail using quotations to highlight and substantiate findings. The themes that emerged are:

(1) learning through mentorship,
(2) leadership learning in community,
(3) redefining success holistically, and
(4) fostering empathy and critical insights.

Learning Through Mentorship

Our research explores the complex relationship between mentors and at-risk students. For instance, the interviews investigated the complexities of an adult mentoring at-risk student, who in turn may have peer-mentoring relations as well. As Wright, John, Livingstone, Shepherd, and Duku (2007) point out, peer relationships among children are very strong predictors of their social or antisocial behavior. Having multiple adult mentors (LEAD teacher candidates, Student Success teachers, associate teachers in the school) provides more possible positive relations for at-risk students. The mentoring relationship requires the individuals involved to form a bond built on mutual trust and respect. Without this bond, neither learning nor mentoring can be sustained (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000).

Some at-risk students interviewed felt they learned from watching teacher candidates:

> I find that I've learned better leadership skills and mentoring skills 'cause now that I've been through project LEAD, I've seen some of the people, like [teacher candidate], like, I see how he handles situations. So, I try to handle situations like that. If they don't work, I try to think of my own strategies…like make a compromise. (Student 3)

The at-risk students saw the teacher candidates as potential confidantes, especially in informal settings. As one student commented,

> It was fun having [teacher candidate] in the hallways, talking to someone when I needed to. And [teacher candidate], I used him probably more than any of these guidance teachers. (Student 1)

Teacher candidates noted that at-risk students were negatively affected when LEAD teacher candidates did not follow through with mentoring. One stated, "The high school students were pretty good with attending all the events, but sometimes they would get in there and be looking around for their [LEAD teacher candidates], and they wouldn't show up." (Teacher candidate 1) Not all LEAD teacher candidates met their commitment, which in turn meant those who were very involved felt more pressure and responsibility.

Teacher candidates indicated throughout the interviews that their success as mentors depended in part on giving up power:

> My ultimate goal was to turn them into leaders, and let them kind of take over and take the lead. So I wanted my role to become gradually less as we went along. So think with mentoring, although you're available to help, you want to almost transform students into being able to make their own decisions. (Teacher candidate 2)

One teacher candidate recognized that many at-risk youth had adult responsibilities way beyond their years:

> I've realized that it's really important to not ever make judgments on students.… You need to really make sure you understand what they are going through and then make as many accommodations as you can so that they can succeed. (Teacher candidate 1)

In the context of this statement, this teacher candidate indicated some awareness of larger, societal barriers facing at-risk students. Ferguson et al. (2005) conclude, after interviewing 193 Canadian at-risk youth, "Poverty was the main reason reported for not returning to school. Mostly, poorer youth assumed an adult role without time, resources or childcare to attend or return to school." (p. 35)

Leadership Learning in Community

Numerous examples were cited of students showing leadership or other skills (excelling in sports, wood carving, and guitar playing). These skills often only came to light when teacher candidates were mentoring the students outside school. As one teacher candidate observed, "Sitting in a classroom, you wouldn't peg him as a leader by any means, and in a different setting, he becomes that kind of person, absolutely." (Teacher candidate 2)

At the camp, at-risk students did activities and multiple oral and written reflections to think about themselves as leaders and how such skills are transferable:

> Especially up at the camp, we did a lot of reflecting on things. So the kids would do an activity and we would talk about why that was important, or what we could take from this and apply back to when we're in school. (Teacher candidate 2)

The adults also observed that many at-risk students articulated their views better through conversation because of poor writing skills. One student reflected:

> To show leadership, to do even what I did at camp, to be the first, or one of the first, to raise my hand to do an activity…. Never really thought that that would

be showing leadership. Before this camp, my opinion on leadership was, "I'm gonna tell you to do something, and you're gonna do it!" (At-risk student 1)

In these interviews, the at-risk students identified the senior citizen home visit as the most important community event: "The old age home helped me connect with people—it helped me realize there's not only your peers that you can interact with" (At-risk student 2). Another student remarked, "It made me realize I was a good leader when we went to the senior citizens' centre and we had to teach the seniors how to play Wii and to see what they would do." (At-risk student 3) All the participants repeatedly referred to the camp experience as key to their mentoring experience:

Usually [we] were just trying to figure out the grade nine students by the end of the year, but now with the camping trip—the possibility of going, it can actually build some bonds with other kids that are at risk—once they get a group they can hang out with, they don't look for that misbehaving or that activity that gets that attention, because they are all in a group, they know each other, so now they can spend more time focusing on what they need to do. (Student Success teacher 2)

The same teacher claimed:

I like that team bonding at the beginning of the year—that they would get to know some of the staff and administration, so now when they are called in it's not a bad thing. It could be, "Hey, how are you doing? How was the trip?"…. It's good to create a link early on. (Student Success teacher 2)

At-risk students stayed in contact within their school and with peers from other schools:

So I already knew these people but I couldn't—wouldn't—hang out with them, but now through project LEAD I feel like I could go into their group and, you know, not be questioned. (At-risk student 3)

Redefining Success Holistically

Adult mentors found social improvements, better attendance, and greater school involvement were more evident than increased grade performance in the at-risk students. Some at-risk students were still failing courses, but in general they seemed engaged in LEAD. Student Success teachers commented on the holistic successes of the at-risk students: "You will prepare them for how to live after high school, you're not just going by the books, you're trying to create that whole person." (Student Success teacher 2)

Another teacher elaborated:

There are students who may have been deemed at risk because of their problems with social interaction with their peers, and quite a few of them in the program

have had histories, or maybe getting into fights and altercations with other people because they've been picked on, or because they have been considered outcast, and being a part of this program has really changed them. I can think of a few students in my mind who haven't had a single fight compared to last year where [they had] fights and suspensions every other week. (Student Success teacher 1)

Success, therefore, is redefined to focus not only on academic skill development but also on social engagement within the broader school culture.

Teacher candidates took theory and put it into action. The philosophical tenets of social learning underlie the YESS (Youth Experiencing Secondary School) project, started in November 2009, which helps eighth-grade students with next year's transition to secondary school. Six LEAD teacher candidates and 30 LEAD at-risk students do all the planning in an equal partnership for the orientation sessions. In YESS, teacher candidates choose LEAD at-risk students who have already shown some of their strengths (i.e., improved attendance). They plan the orientation for 150 students, who represent the whole population of incoming students. Teacher candidates use Hellison's (2003) model of personal and social responsibility. For at-risk students to become responsible, they must learn to take on responsibility and have opportunities to practice being responsible on a regular basis. According to Hellison, in order to give at-risk students responsibility, teachers need to apply instructional strategies that emphasize sharing power with students. This requires a shift in the decision making from the teacher to the students.

Taking a risk, the teacher candidates let at-risk students lead, giving them this large responsibility, knowing that they might fail. They know the students are at risk, but they build on their strengths and empower these students to exercise their talents. For instance, if they are good at basketball, then the orientation will involve shooting some hoops with incoming students. Thus the whole person's abilities, not just academic skills, are brought into play. For many at-risk students, it is the first time in their lives that their opinion is sought and acted upon. Moreover, they are not in competition with peers from the general population—only LEAD students are called upon to organize YESS.

According to social learning, students learn best from one another (Bandura, 1997; Parajes, 1996). If the incoming eighth-grade students see at-risk students as leaders, they think to themselves, "Hey, that could be me next year!" Ninth- and tenth-grade at-risk students plan YESS. The inclusion of the tenth-grade LEAD students is key to the peer-mentoring model because as eleventh-grade students they will mentor incoming ninth graders. Teacher candidates commented on how capable these youth were in this leadership role and how well they responded to the implicit trust in their team planning. They also indicated that as novice teachers, they were surprised by how much their own perceptions of what it means to be an "at-risk" student changed when they witnessed these students working as a team and successfully mentoring the incoming students (field notes, February 22, 2010).

Fostering Empathy and Critical Insights

To work with at-risk youth, teacher candidates require the ability to create a safe learning environment by means of acceptance, genuineness, and empathy (Rogers, 1993) . One Student Success teacher hoped that program participation ensured teacher candidates did not wait until mid-career to figure out how to work with at-risk youth. Consistently, teacher candidates remarked, "You have lots of opportunities to keep working with them, and then you become like a constant factor in their lives, and then they start to really trust you." (Teacher candidate 1)

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Teacher candidates emphasized that only the direct experience of working with at-risk students in conjunction with their LEAD university course work could show them the reality:

> Poverty, what to expect when we're working with these students, and the types of behavior that we'll encounter, it didn't really, like, phase me at all, because I really couldn't put a face to what [educators] were talking about—I had really never experienced it before. (Teacher candidate 1)

Another teacher candidate stated, "I'm not even sure what I really would've guessed or considered at risk until this program and my year here. I think just the prevalence of it within schools was lost on me." (Teacher candidate 2) Levin, Gaskell, and Pollock (2007) point out that "the changes remain controversial and fragile, but there can be no going back to an education policy that treats students and families as undifferentiated." (p. 19) Echoing this point, one teacher candidate observed, "Sometimes you do have to treat [at-risk students] differently just because they have disadvantages that other kids don't." (Teacher candidate 2) From this experience of mentoring at-risk youth, teacher candidates learned about social justice issues—they gained greater insights and empathy that enables them to develop critical literacies.

Discussion

Fostering Critical Literacies Among Teacher Candidates

The university LEAD course focuses on reading social learning articles. Teacher candidates write reflective journals throughout the year to link field experiences and theoretical critiques. Their written reflections are shared through class discussions or the professor reading and responding to their entries. These teacher candidates discuss such issues as the polemics of all-Black schools in Toronto, complications for female pregnant students, and logistical barriers faced by students with limited resources. Each reflection on their experiences requires them to link the tasks and outcomes to theoretical perspectives. One clear example is the Power of your Potential project (POP), where teacher candidates create a conference for more than 400 students deemed at risk to explore their potential for success. Financial assistance

seminars, realistic goal setting, available support systems, and experts from numerous fields help the students discover their potential by examining their strengths and skills for resilience. Having read Bernard's (2003) book on resiliency prior to creating the conference, the teacher candidates rely on the key characteristics of developing resilience in at-risk youth to design this event. They talk about their own struggles in choosing pathways and how to move from hopelessness to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

This learning process has political attributes. As Rogers (2002) puts it:

> Critical literacy learning is a socio-culturally situated set of processes drawing on theories of learning that emphasize: (a) that learning is mediated by language, (b) that learning cannot be separated from its context, (c) that learning occurs first on the social plane and then is internalized, and (d) that learning involves more knowledgeable others, such as peers and adults. (p. 774)

By shaping their views through various discourse practices (with each other, at-risk students, professors, teachers, community activists), teacher candidates come to see how their perspectives on at-risk youth are always mediated through (sometimes competing, sometimes complementary) points of view.

A critical literacy perspective argues that education is never a neutral enterprise. It is always embedded in shifting cultural and political terrains. Critical literacy, then, works as a good model to look at some of the assumptions that might construct how teacher candidates and at-risk youth perceive their roles beyond an individual perspective. It also offers a model to further enhance service learning, as Hart (2006) proposes:

> The act of reflecting moves from a simple individualistic notion of locating oneself within the service-learning experience to a broader understanding in which the individual must locate oneself in conjunction with the service-learning experience and its connection to a larger social and political context. Such "critical" reflection may move the student to begin questioning the causes for the need of the service provided; what structures are in place that may impede broader transformation for the community beyond this one service experience; and what personal roles are played in maintaining those structures. (p. 27)

Our findings did not demonstrate a strong critique on the part of the participants of the political, institutional, and societal mechanisms at play. There was some awareness of these larger issues; however, observations were mostly confined to discussing individual and group dynamics.

Using a critical literacy theoretical framework, we argue that power, embedded in hegemonic practices, must be discerned through critical thinking about access and privilege to institutional programs. Through this reading of social practices, we may better understand power relations. Thus students who are deemed at risk—from a critical literacy perspective—are a symptom of systematized discrimination rather than a cause of problems rooted in society.

One of the primary tenets of critical literacy is that marginalized groups (e.g., English-language learners, lower socioeconomic status teenagers) confront systemic discrimination on a regular basis. Various studies show that central to overcoming societal barriers, changes must be made in policies and carried out at the institutional level to provide equitable opportunities (Cheney et al., 2004; Zeichner, 1996, 2006). From a critical literacy viewpoint, we argue that traditional schooling (which has underserved certain segments of its population) may be a historical model generally accepted as the norm, yet it is a social construct—not necessarily a stable entity—and thus open to critique and paradigmatic shifts.

As these teacher candidates experience their placements, community activities, and the LEAD university course, they are given opportunities to be proponents or critics of social justice education. A crucial characteristic of critical literacy learning is that theory *must be linked* to action in the community. And so the combination of an extended field experience and postsecondary theoretical discussions about social justice education creates a dialogue to challenge presuppositions as to who is "at risk." Shor and Parri (1999) describe critical literacy in action: "Oriented toward self in social context, critical literacy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goals of challenging inequality and developing an activist citizenry." (p. 11) This focus on "activist citizenry" may encourage teacher candidates as they grapple with their own teaching philosophies to see institutional structures as key variables in the complex dynamics of individuals' lives. Given that the LEAD field experience model has the advantage of sustained institutional support, we ask the larger question that the program apparently has only partially addressed: What are the underlying power dynamics of this partnership?

The subtle shifts in these institutional supports greatly influence how individual mentor-based relations are affected. We believe that one of the field experience model's greatest strengths is that it is institutionally supported. Ironically however, its very institutionalization may limit organizers' flexibility to meet participants' needs. For example, teacher candidates indicated that they were frustrated that they would not be able to work with the students to the end of the school year since their bachelor of education program did not coincide in schedule. They also noted tensions between Student Success and associate teachers. Not all associates agreed with the emphasis of working one-on-one with at-risk students instead of focusing heavily on content areas.

In this research model, at-risk youth go to the camp in their first year of high school, but some associate teachers think this rewards bad behavior and that camp should be saved as an incentive for later years. However, this mentorship model necessitates that the camp be one of the first experiences for both teacher candidates and at-risk students. This priority is premised on the belief that the camp experience forges personal bonds when participants are physically removed from the school environment that many of these youth

associate with repeated failure. Moreover, it works from the theoretical models of social learning and communities of practice. It also allows for at-risk students to build increasing leadership and mentorship skills of their own. Teacher candidates often feel torn, not knowing which teaching philosophy to embrace—the traditional, custodial model or this mentorship model. They feel the "ripple effect" of institutional constraints. For instance, SS/L18 is more fully implemented in some schools than others, often depending if a particular high school administration buys into the model.

The focus on leadership is also seen as a double-edged sword for teacher candidates. They are thrilled to have freedom in defining the program but feel the weight of this responsibility. They also sometimes feel stretched to meet their commitments to the at-risk students outside the classroom. Nevertheless, it was remarked repeatedly by those interviewed that this is where they felt the greatest bonding took place.

Interestingly, teacher candidates sign up for this program knowing that the school boards are in partnership. Shor and Parri (1999) comment that critical literacy supports dissident politics. Perhaps surprisingly, school boards, which are sometimes labeled as conservative, sanction working out of a social justice mode. This sanction, one might expect, influences teacher candidates' willingness to participate in a more radical field placement model. The institutional support at many levels gives it legitimacy.

Redefining Success Holistically

Tensions in LEAD result from the necessity of participants and policymakers moving from a traditional, custodial attitude to "disadvantaged youth" toward another kind of model. This alternative model sees these students as capable of great leadership, given the right support.

In their study of secondary students' engagement with school rules, Raby and Domitrek (2007) conclude that students notice hypocrisies and debate school rules. More often, students felt "they had little say in how their lives were governed [in school] and they were deeply skeptical about any possibility that they could be. They were resigned to a structural environment that they found oppressive." (p. 950) Basically, traditional rule enforcement in education frustrates students who are marginalized by differential discipline. Rather than incorporating democratic citizenship (France, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Schimmel, 2003) the rules are perceived as arbitrary, inconsistently applied, and made to be broken.

A holistic approach to mentoring at-risk students in various contexts moves away from a binary approach that defines students in terms of who complies with or defies rules. Zeichner (2006) writes, "There is an acknowledgement of the social and political dimensions of teaching along with its other dimensions and recognition of teachers' contributions to the life chances of their students." (p. 8) Encouraging this kind of political growth, and rooted in the local

experience, teacher candidates come to their own realizations. As one noted, "I would ask [at-risk students] questions about life, but some of the things they said were very shocking. It made you sort of understand why they do the things they do a little bit better." (Teacher candidate 2) Teacher candidates may come to see that in serving at-risk youth, they are also serving their community.

Learning Through Mentorship

Mentoring by a significant adult has been shown to positively increase retention (Ferguson et al., 2005; Kerka, 1997; Salinitri, 2006; Smink & Schargel, 2004). A successful mentoring relationship enables the mentee to learn and grow in a safe and protected environment. Because mentoring is complex and situational (Gardner, 1998; Garvey & Alred, 2001; Hay, 1995), teacher candidates must be aware of the explicit intent of mentoring and attain the skills to create a mutual understanding and a vision of mentoring needs of the youth for the relationship to grow successfully. Through multiple opportunities, at-risk students are initially asked to challenge their limited social construct of their own identities. They aspire to become leaders by taking on increasing responsibility for the outdoor education experience and community projects during their high school career. It is expected that since mentorship is defined here as a two-way avenue, at-risk students will also educate the teacher candidates implicitly and explicitly about working with youths who have experienced marginalization and disempowerment in their lives.

At the very least, the teacher candidates and at-risk students interviewed felt a mutual respect and an appreciation for the idea that they could learn from one another. The Student Success teachers provide consistency for the program and track results. They are there for the at-risk students throughout their four years of high school, whereas the teacher candidates following their one-year preservice program will only continue to maintain contact with these students if they are hired in the schools or continue to volunteer in LEAD.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Like other research on mentor field experience models (e.g., Cheney et al., 2004; Keating et al., 2002; McDonald, 2005), there is a need in the LEAD field experience model to build further capacity in teacher candidates to think critically about the institutional systems of power that hinder or support at-risk students. A more explicit focus on the tenets of critical literacy in the university classroom may help teacher candidates think about how they and at-risk students are situated in relation to the educational bodies with which they are working. The findings show that teacher candidates and at-risk students are moving toward redefining success in holistic terms. Like Ungerleider's (2008) findings on the Student Success program, the success of these students is
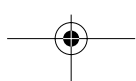
measured more in their greater attendance and general engagement than in improved grades. The teacher candidates understand how to better conceptualize leadership in educational and community settings. In addition, it seems that some preconceptions of at-risk youth are debunked, and that they embrace a mentor-based pedagogy. Clearly, a limitation of this initial study is that only eight participants were interviewed. There is a need to build further on this research. The next step is a more extensive study that follows one cohort of the at-risk students' four-year high school career. For the teacher candidates, it involves following them through their bachelor of education program and their first three years of teaching to explore how their teacher identities develop.

Through a critical literacy model, we argue that students in their everyday habits of thinking and acting self-regulate within the system they know. This study critiques whether teacher candidates perceive their role in this field experience model as transformative in how they attitudinally and pedagogically approach the profession. Based on this initial research, since it does not follow the teacher candidates into their teaching careers, it is hard to say if teacher candidates are sufficiently prepared to work with at-risk youth. Notwithstanding these limitations, our study creates an active dialogue about the model's effects on teacher candidates' and at-risk students' attitudinal approaches within the field experience model. We hope our research also illuminates how social justice education may benefit teacher candidates by fostering critical literacy to a greater degree through praxis.

Notes on Contributors

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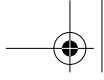
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