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Bringing the Community Back in: Change, Accommodation, and Contestation in a School and University Partnership

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This article describes the three-year evolution of a team-taught teacher education class entitled the "Social Contexts of Education" in the setting of an urban high school. The course developed a number of innovative practices, including collaborative instruction by K-12 and university faculty and the development of a parent engagement strategy that increased parent participation by 59% in the school's Fall Parent Night in the second year of the collaborative. The authors describe the rewards and challenges of such site-based activities, and indicate that while school and university partnerships are highly valued in many contemporary policy initiatives, student teachers may resist such partnerships, particularly when they are based in urban school sites with which they may have had little prior experience.

Research on community engagement in urban teacher preparation provides abundant evidence indicating that teacher education programs as currently constituted do not provide teacher candidates with an adequate knowledge base to communicate effectively with working-class parents of color whose children attend urban public schools (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Murrell, 2001; Williams & Chavkin, 1987). Teacher educators have sought to address this problem, often through approaches related to multicultural education and urban education (Grant & Secada, 1990; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Villegas & Lucas, 2001). In addition to the goal of quality teacher preparation, a number of pedagogical approaches informed by social justice commitments view community engagement as a central component of not only the improvement of teaching and learning but also of the political empowerment of historically disenfranchised communities (Freire, 1970, 2000; Moses & Cobb, 2001; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000).

In light of these problems, the authors have been working in a variety of venues for the past five years to develop our capacities as "boundary spanners" who seek to integrate community concerns and perspectives into the core of teacher education practices. As is the case with most school and university partnerships, the collaboration between Boston College and the Boston Public Schools—the institutions in which we are based—is both broad and deep. Our collaboration is long-standing, has wrought profound institutional and cultural changes both in our partnering Boston schools and in Boston College, and can provide insight into the variability and complex evolution of boundary spanning roles. In addition, our special emphasis on what might be described as community engagement offers a new and distinctive lens for examining school and university partnerships.

In what follows, we first describe why the educators on the initial writing team for the Massachusetts Coalition considered not only school and university partnerships, but also increased community engagement to be a critical component of our conjoint activities. Second, we move from this background information to a description of the evolution of one site-based course taught over three years in an urban high school. The successes and dilemmas of this course illuminate the benefits as well as the problems of boundary spanners who engage with the nitty-gritty problems of real institutional and cultural change. Third, we step back and consider the larger impact of our coalition on community engagement in urban education and on our conceptualizations of the school, university, and community interface.

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DEVELOPING THE SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Especially noteworthy for our present consideration is the second goal of the Massachusetts Coalition: to promote the school and community-based potential of teacher education. Given the many barriers that separate urban schools from their communities, as well as the turbulent character of urban educational politics, establishing this goal represented something of a risk for the initial writing team of the Coalition. For although it was clear to the writing team that collaboration with arts and sciences faculty and K-12 faculty were "non-negotiables" in terms of funders' priorities, scholars and activists in the Coalition insisted on developing a strand that (to our minds) was intentionally radical. One of our writing team members (Murrell, 1998) had developed a widely-read criticism of professional development schools for being culturally disconnected from urban communities. Another member (Shirley, 1997) had made similar observations about teacher education programs in general. As a result of these findings and through a process of lengthy group deliberation and debate, the writing team committed itself to giving teacher education a community base. We would do this both physically (by teaching classes on-site in urban schools with community-based organizations) and pedagogically (by integrating community members into our ongoing deliberations, workshops and conferences.

The Massachusetts Coalition received notification of our funding in September 1999, and our first statewide conferences in 1999 and 2000 emphasized the theme of community engagement in urban education. Keynote speakers at events included parent activists from the Boston Parents' Organizing Committee, the Institute for Responsive Education, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Worcester Interfaith, and other community-based groups with long histories of civic engagement in Massachusetts' metropolitan regions. In addition, Ernie Cortes, the lead community organizer behind the Alliance Schools of Texas (Shirley, 1997, 2002) offered leadership development workshops to assist the Coalition to generate its own strategies for establishing a network of boundary spanners who would cross different institutional lines to build civic capacity and improve teacher quality.

In the wake of these events, stakeholders in the Coalition initiated a series of strategies for working with communities to promote culturally-responsive critical pedagogies and student achievement. Faculty at Northeastern University broke with the teacher education tradition of school-based placements and placed students in their "Introduction to Education" class in community settings, such as churches, sports facilities, and libraries to teach reading and writing. The teacher education faculty at the University of Massachusetts—Boston held department meetings at the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Roxbury; hired the Chair of the Education Committee at Dudley Street to serve as a liaison for the schools, the university, and the community; and developed a substitute teacher induction program in collaboration with activities from the Boston chapter of the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN). A professor in residence from Lesley University hired a parent activist to coordinate communication between teachers and parents in her urban elementary school. Urban schools and universities in Boston, Springfield, and Worcester used Coalition resources to promote stronger ties to Spanish-speaking immigrant parents. Coalition conferences and newsletters emphasized the parent engagement thrust of this work, thus overcoming much of the technical emphasis on a narrow definition of teacher professionalism in recent teacher education reform and building upon democratic and social reconstructionist traditions in the history of American education (Liston & Zeichner, 1991; Oakes et al., 2000).

Through these innovations the Massachusetts Coalition attempted to develop a cohort of boundary spanners who would utilize an assets-driven approach to school improvement that placed a premium on the mobilization of indigenous community resources. We especially sought to overcome the cultural encapsulation of higher education faculty from urban diversity that in many ways has undermined not only the efficacy but also the democratic promise of teacher education in a multicultural society. By providing a variety of forums for bringing together teacher educators, K-12 faculty, and community-based organizations, the Massachusetts Coalition endeavored to breathe a spirit of participatory democracy into school improvement efforts in the three major metropolitan areas of the Commonwealth.

The preceding provides a schematic overview of the Coalition's community engagement activities. At its core, the Massachusetts Coalition operates at a macro-level system of practice, connecting urban communities and schools with one another and providing political opportunities for improving education that cannot occur if institutional boundaries are rigid, bureaucratic, and impermeable (Murrell, 2001). While macro-level changes are important, however, they must be integrated with "meso" and "micro" levels of practice at the school and classroom level to develop truly effective activity settings (Murrell, 2001). Hence, in the next section of this article, we describe in some detail one attempt to confront the "community engagement" challenge, based on the development of a single Boston College course over three years, from Fall 2001 to Fall 2003. This course provided a laboratory for testing the hypothesis that a teacher education course could develop our capacities as boundary spanners to enhance parent engagement in the setting of an urban public high school.

THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND BOSTON COLLEGE

Boston College has, for many years, collaborated with schools in what is now called "Cluster V" of the Boston Public Schools. These schools are concentrated in the northwest segment of the city known as Allston-Brighton (although in 2001 several schools were added in Mission Hill and Roxbury), which is the largest of nine major neighborhoods in Boston and is home to roughly 70,000 people (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2000). One urban high school, Lewes High (a pseudonym), serves roughly 1,200 students. Of these, approximately 27% come from Allston-Brighton, with the other 73% bused in from the other "clustered" neighborhoods and many of the pupils travelling for more than an hour each way on public transportation. Roughly 80% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; because of the high poverty level, the entire school receives Title I (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965) funding.

As part of our activities with the Massachusetts Coalition, Shirley (the first author of this article) began teaching a class entitled "Social Contexts of Education" on-site at Lewes High in the fall of 2001. This course is required of all masters degree candidates in teacher preparatory programs at Boston College. As an initial effort to bridge the school and university divide, Shirley asked Elizabeth MacDonald and Connie Scandone (additional authors), two teachers in the Boston Public Schools, to join him in teaching the class; they would receive three credits of tuition remission for teaching the class in an independent study format with the professor. This instructional team met every Tuesday morning for breakfast to plan the classes on Thursday evenings and two members of the instructional team read every paper written by student teachers for the course.

In the first fall of this collaboration numerous activities occurred that highlighted the complexities of education for students today. To reach Massachusetts Coalition goals, the instructors had planned numerous activities focusing on school and community collaborations. Little did we expect—little could anyone have imagined—the events of September 11, 2001. Suddenly the topic of school and community relations was thrust into our consciousness in a way none of us could anticipate. MacDonald and Scandone described teachers in their school who panicked and left their pupils unattended. The class as a whole had to ponder what the role of educators during such times of tragedy were and what the responsibilities of educators were in terms of communicating with parents during a crisis.

Throughout that fall semester many examples of the complex nature of school and community relationships were debated during the course. In the interests of brevity here, we select only one at this juncture. The professor of record for the course (Shirley) had previously conducted research on the community organizing activities of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) (Shirley, 1997), and his book was required reading for the class. Shirley, MacDonald, and Scandone invited organizers from the Boston IAF affiliate—the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO)—to speak to their class, and the GBIO organizers described a recent organizing action they had undertaken to dramatize the paucity of materials in the public schools. GBIO leaders had met with the school committee and demanded greater funding for textbooks; subsequently, the superintendent and mayor had agreed to designate an additional $2 million for school supplies. MacDonald and Scandone had thought that all of that additional funding had been exhausted, but the GBIO organizers informed them that this was not the case and that the organizers could help them to acquire additional materials. Subsequently, MacDonald and Scandone set up a meeting for the GBIO organizers to meet with their principal, who successfully accessed supplementary textbooks for their school.

This process of advocating for additional resources (in the case of the GBIO action), establishing one-on-one relationships (when the GBIO organizers came to class), and garnering a "winnable issue" in terms of the textbooks represent part of the nuts-and-bolts of community organizing (Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001). Students in the Social Contexts class, who witnessed the whole evolution of this process, had the opportunity not only to study such organizing activities through studying Shirley's book but also through direct observation during our class discussions. Since research on adult learners indicates that this kind of experiential learning is critical for its import to be internalized, the synthesis of theoretical and applied knowledge in the context of the class represented a valuable fusion of abstract understandings and "street-level" skills (Lipsky, 1980).

Aside from this organizing interlude, the first year of the Social Contexts class at Lewes High consisted of a relatively quiet and circumspect effort simply to learn about the culture of city schools and their many strengths and challenges. Several of the challenges related to the difficult social environments of the schools' pupils. One pupil from Lewes High who had a part-time job at Boston College attended many of our classes at the beginning of the semester but then had to be sent to another school after physical threats made against him made it unsafe for him to attend the school any longer. Another pupil, who had been a guest speaker, was sent to a home administered by Youth Protective Services in the middle of the semester. In spite of these setbacks, the teacher education students were especially impressed by MacDonald and Scandone, who shared their commitment to their

students, their schools, and their work with parents and other community members throughout the semester.

The next evolution of the Social Context class was prompted by an event that occurred in April 2002, when Charlie Skidmore (an additional author of this article), the headmaster at Lewes High, asked if Boston College would participate in leading a day of professional development activities planned for faculty at the school. The sixth goal in the district's "whole-school improvement plan" required every school to have a strategy for working with parents and community members—but the school was at a loss as to how to build these relationships. Lewes High had previously had funding for a parent liaison, but the funding had expired and the position had been terminated. Parent participation in Parents' Night activities was low—generally below 150 each fall in a school with about 1,200 pupils—and teachers sensed that they had failed to build appropriate bridges to communicate with parents. The location of the school in a community remote from Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester—where the majority of students and their parents lived—was yet another obstacle to close school and community ties.

More than 30 Boston College faculty and administrators agreed to work with the school on the professional development initiative, and they listened to teachers' frustration about low levels of parent engagement in the school throughout the professional development day. Teachers were especially disturbed that although over 40% of their students had a grade point average below 1.65 (on a scale of 4.0) and hence were disqualified from sports, clubs, and holding class offices, they rarely received any queries from parents about the academic status of their daughters and sons. Boston College faculty who listened to the teachers wondered how they might channel teachers' concerns in productive directions. In terms of the educational research literature, Lewes High staff and the broader community it served needed to develop what some analysts (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001) have described as "civic capacity"—that is, a "shared and durable understanding of public education as a major area of community concern and a high priority for action" (p. 27).

As a result of Skidmore's leadership as a boundary spanner engaging Boston College faculty, over the summer of 2002 Shirley worked with the headmaster, teachers, parents, and community-based organizations at the school to develop an action plan for increasing parent engagement. Given that one of the goals of the Massachusetts Coalition was to "increase the school and community-based nature of teacher education," it appeared appropriate to initiate a pilot project in which the "Social Contexts of Education" class might promote some parent engagement strategies. Together, we decided to see if the class could play a role in raising the level of parent engagement at the November Parents' Night.

In September 2002, Skidmore visited the opening Social Context class and requested that the teacher candidates work with the school to increase parent engagement. Subsequently, the Social Context class convened weekly in the Career Services Library of Lewes High and interviewed teachers, students, and parents to learn about multiple facets of the Lewes High pupils' lives relevant to education. Teacher candidates studied research on community organizing, parent involvement, urban education, and multicultural education, and brought questions generated by the readings to the class' engagement with the organizing process. Grant funds from the Massachusetts Coalition provided tuition for four teachers from the school to take the class, and those teachers educated the entire Social Context class, including the professor, on the very real challenges (as well as their significant victories) that they experienced on a day-to-day basis in the school.

At the same time, a Boston College-based team, led by Shirley and Afra Hersi (a Curriculum and Instruction doctoral student who had taken the Social Contexts class in the fall of 2001 and an additional author of this article), began meeting with teachers, parents, and representatives of community-based organizations to plan the Parents' Night activities in November. Simply targeting the Parents' Night as a priority months in advance was in many ways a first for the school, which had previously waited until November to set the date of Parents' Night. Throughout the fall, Hersi worked as an inventive and tenacious on-the-ground boundary spanner at Lewes High, recruiting a broad base of teachers and community activists to coordinate strategies for the Parents' Night and to lay the groundwork for a long-term parent engagement component of the school's "whole-school improvement plan."

Much of this work was tenuous and difficult. Although many of the day-to-day routines of teaching and learning at Lewes High operate smoothly, sporadic incidents related to violence, drug-dealing, or truancy intermittently led the school to lose its academic focus. Fine (1994) has commented on the high level of "communitarian damage" (p. 23) experienced by urban high schools due to years of disappointing student achievement outcomes on the one hand, and bureaucratic intractability from central administrations on the other. Lewes High was not immune to these problems, and although planning for the Parents' Night began with enthusiasm in September, one planning meeting in October was almost cancelled because a required meeting for all school faculty was scheduled for the same time. The conflicting meeting was set to help faculty to understand how to record data about student misconduct in an a new on-line database. Because of this conflicting meeting, the parent engagement planning meeting was much smaller, and we worried that the school was wavering on its commitment to improve school and community relationships.

Following this incident, Shirley scheduled a meeting with Skidmore, to ascertain whether the parent engagement work was still a priority for the school. Skidmore explained that a number of recent incidents related to disruptive and occasionally violent altercations among students had alarmed his colleagues and that dealing with the safety issue had taken priority at that point in time. He further asserted that the parent engagement theme was indeed critical for the school and indicated his commitment to continuing the emphasis of our collaborative work on the topic.

Throughout the fall a small cadre of teachers from Lewes High, led by those taking the class, nurtured relationships with parents, primarily through extensive telephone calls, as well as mailings and notifications sent home with pupils. Those notifications were primarily in English, but Spanish and Portuguese translations were made for the school's numerous Hispanic families. A parent liaison working with GEAR UP, a federally-funded college preparatory program, made phone calls to the Spanish-speaking parents to keep them abreast of developments. An emerging theme of "Services for You and Your Children" came out of the planning meetings, and the circle of housing, immigration, mental health, and medical experts invited to welcome the community to the Parents' Night expanded. As a result of a generative process of boundary spanning activities, the Parents' Night was slowly evolving into a potential fulcrum of community engagement.

Simultaneous with these efforts, planning was underway to consult the parents at the Parents' Night about their own opinions about Lewes High and to solicit their ideas about work that could be accomplished to improve school and community ties. Much of this planning was informed by the deliberations of the Community Engagement Task Force of UNITE (Urban Networks to Improve Teacher Education), which several members of this writing group joined over the past three years. The Task Force consists of higher education faculty, teachers, administrators, parents, and community activists and is affiliated with the Holmes Partnership. As part of its study of community engagement in city schools the Task Force had read Shirley's (1997) *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* and a recent synopsis of an 11-city National Science Foundation study by Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) entitled *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools.* As Chair of the Task Force, Shirley's thinking informed much of its evolution, and Stone spoke to the Task Force about civic capacity at a UNITE meeting in Washington, DC in January 2002. In each case, those works emphasized that successful school reform depended upon strong parent engagement components, not as the only facet of school improvement but as one critical strand of it.

UNITE's work is relevant here because the Community Engagement Task Force had worked in its fall Leadership Development Institute to develop a survey instrument that would measure not simply *parent involvement* (in the more traditional sense of serving to reach goals already established by the school) but a more robust sense of *parent engagement* (in which parents develop civic leadership and fuse the school's academic goals with broader community concerns).[1] The students in the Social Context class agreed to approach parents with the survey at the fall Parents' Night and to ask them to complete it, either while they were waiting to meet with a teacher or during a break between activities. Spanish-speaking students in the class agreed to translate the survey for parents so that their perspectives could be solicited.

Given the themes of parent engagement and civic capacity that emerged during the planning process, it became critical for our planning group to include a broad array of community-based organizations in the Parents' Night activities themselves. Those organizations came to include representatives from local public housing facilities, Boys and Girls Clubs, representatives from medical services, and individuals assisting immigrants with settlement and access to public services. We agreed that part of the school's cafeteria, where parents would be receiving their children's fall semester report cards, should be turned over to the community groups, whose resources would be intermingled with food and drinks set out for the parents.

When the Parents' Night finally arrived on 20 November, the number of parents in attendance rose from 145 in 2001 to 231 in 2002—an increase of 59%. On the one hand, the increase could seem small, given the effort that went into recruitment and the size of student enrollment in the school. Nonetheless, the faculty, parents, and teacher candidates who put the collaborative work into the Parents' Night were delighted, with teachers who had worked in the school for years stating that the turnout was the highest they had ever seen and that a corner had been turned in the evolution of the school. Some teachers had lines of parents waiting outside of their classrooms to meet with them, a sight that none of the teachers said they had ever experienced at Lewes High.

From the perspective of spanning the boundaries between the school and the university, the significance of the work at Lewes High School in the fall is not really that parent participation went up at the Parents' Night, although that was an important first step. What is more important is that school faculty, working with parents and Boston College teacher candidates, learned that they could change the culture of their school and collaborate to raise parent participation. Exit surveys of the parents revealed that although fewer than half of them had received flyers that were sent home with their children, well over 80% had received personal phone calls made by Lewes High teachers. As for the Social Contexts students, they had entered a meso-level "circle of practice" in the real setting of an urban school in which diverse

stakeholders collaborated to build civic capacity between the parents and the school.

After the fall Parents' Night the collective sensibility that years of low parent participation were a "naturalized" part of the school culture was disrupted. Teachers saw that parents could and would come to the Parents' Night, given sufficient prior notification, phone calls home, and hand-outs to students. The theory behind such organizing is that the sense that things *can* be different is tremendously important to leadership development—and that this acknowledgment is far more important than mere parent turn-out, programmatic changes, or other similarly static kinds of outcomes (Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001).

At the "micro-level" of the class in the Social Contexts of Education, the experimental design of the class—organized around a Lewes High faculty-identified priority—appeared vindicated. Student evaluations of the class were overwhelmingly positive, although some students clearly found the unpredictability entailed in working with a large urban school around community engagement disconcerting. In a final survey of students in the class, all 29 of the students agreed that the class should continue to be taught on-site at Lewes High, and 28 students agreed that the class should "continue to link Lewes High School goals with Social Contexts curricula."

As for Lewes High School, the faculty and community-based organizations who had collaborated in the fall planned a subsequent Parents' Night, with little assistance from Boston College, for February 2002. The school's faculty decided to focus on the theme of presenting students' work to the parents and followed through with refreshments, phone calls to pupils' homes, and written announcements. Unfortunately, parent participation dropped considerably from the November meeting—an outcome that could be at least partially attributed to bitterly cold winter weather. Yet the key fact of teacher and community ownership of Parents' Night activities was once again established.

THE THIRD YEAR OF THE CLASS

Encouraged by the evolution of the Social Contexts class at Lewes High in its first two years, Shirley sought to escalate the class to another level of boundary spanning activities. For the next iteration of the class, Shirley asked two graduate assistants and two Boston Public School teachers to team-teach the class with him. The two graduate assistants (and author of this article)—Afra Hersi and Maria Sanchez—both had previous experience with a range of Massachusetts Coalition activities. One of the teachers (Patric MacDonald, another author of this article) had team-taught the Social Contexts class in the fall of 2001 and was a teacher leader in the Massachusetts Coalition. The other teacher (Patrick Tutwiler, another author of this article) was a ninth grade history teacher at Lewes High as well as a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Boston College. We anticipated a class of approximately 40 students, and assigned each of the collaborating instructors to lead a "home group" of eight–ten students.

In planning the class for its next incarnation, the five members of the instructional team convened throughout the summer of 2003 to select readings, establish course goals, and discuss potential activities. We determined that we would keep most of the course readings from the previous year but add in several new activities. We wanted our teacher education students to meet with a panel of teachers to learn about teachers' experiences with urban parents, and we also wanted to meet with a panel of parents to learn about their experiences with the public schools. In our planning for the Parents' Night in November 2003 we had met with the director of a public housing complex behind Lewes High School, and we decided to convene a class in the Community Center of the project so that parents would not need to come to the school. Hopeful that we could increase the leadership preparation of future teachers, we decided that the class culminating activity would be a community organizing project linked to the November Parents' Night at Lewes High.

The class began in the fall on an upbeat note. Students in the class were surprised and excited about the innovative format, and we received many enthusiastic comments after the first class. They remarked that the class seemed well organized and they were appreciative of the effort to link a teacher preparatory class with real problems in a real school. There was some concern about getting transportation to the urban high school setting, but students were willing to make a go of it. The class had grown steadily each year—from 13 students in the first year to 27 in the next to 35 in the third year.

Throughout the semester, students seemed highly engaged with the course. The panel of teachers and a panel of students from Lewes High were well received and gave students a range of views about teaching and learning in an urban school. The meeting at the Community Center of the housing project was especially memorable, for several reasons. First, many students commented that the housing project was much nicer than they expected; several had been by the projects before, had not known they were public housing, and some had even wondered if they might be available for student housing. Second, students were struck by one part of the tour of the public housing grounds—a green and open sports field that doubled as a spot to sell and buy drugs. The high school students in the project had to make their way past the dealers every day after school—thus shaping the students' learning environment in ways both subtle and overt. Third, students enjoyed meeting with the parents, and many reported on the similarity between parents in the projects and parents anywhere—as individuals who

loved their children, did their best to keep them on-task with their school work, and struggled to earn a living wage. A particularly joyful moment occurred when children in the project found that MacDonald, a teacher in a local elementary school, was in the Community Center, and rushed in to embrace her, provoking warm and amused smiles from the Social Contexts students.

In a new twist, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) of Lewes High requested a new activity in an October 2003 meeting that they hoped the Social Contexts class would help the school with: encouraging the students to prepare for attendance in higher education institutions. In the meeting, Social Contexts instructors brainstormed with school faculty about the way they could best help with the fall Parents' Night. We decided that apart from parents meeting teachers and picking up their children's report cards, a portion of the evening should focus on raising awareness about the viability of college and university studies for the high school students. Faculty in the school would wear shirts and jackets promoting their alma mater, and the Social Contexts students would bring in materials from their alma maters as well. Some of the neighborhood associations that had participated in the Parents' Night the previous year would be invited back, and Social Contexts students would contribute time to recruit parents to come to the Parents' Night, but the overarching theme for the Social Contexts class would be to get Lewes High School students and their parents thinking about higher education. In this way, our boundary spanning work was to help the urban high school students and their parents to engage with yet another set of external institutions—colleges and universities that could help the students to advance their educations beyond high school.

All seemed well for the first two-thirds of the course, and then the class either unraveled seriously or created a first-class learning opportunity, depending on one's point of view. What happened? In spite of a summer of careful planning, the instructors had not anticipate the level of anxiety aroused by the final community organizing project for the Social Contexts students. While Shirley happily wandered through the halls of the high school on Parents' Night, chattering away with parents in (his frankly atrocious) Spanish, a significant minority of the Social Contexts students felt out of place and did not really know how to approach parents. Even many of those with well-prepared materials about their alma maters later reported feeling ill at ease and not at all ready to engage with the parents or the pupils of the school. While some students had prepared innovative materials on how to finance higher education or information on the Presidential candidates' stances on education (in both English and Spanish), a vocal cohort of students informed the Social Context instructional team during a debriefing after the Parents' Night that they felt that the advocacy for college had been badly planned and did not fit well with a school's Parents' Night. This group, which emerged into something of an oppositional cohort, felt that a College Admissions Night should be convened separately, which many reported had been done in their private and suburban high schools. Finally, the fact that their activities and reflections about that evening would be judged on a final paper they would write, accounting for 35% of their grade, struck many as insensitive and beyond the bounds of what they were asked to do for any other class.

It is important to note that the oppositional students, while adamant in their protests, did not represent all of the students. Many had positive encounters with parents; others enjoyed meeting with Lewes High pupils and teachers; and still others saw the Parents' Night as an opportunity to explore another side of contemporary education with which they had little contact before. In their final papers, these students expressed anger toward the oppositional students, whom they accused of having learned little of the urban context in which the class was situated and being closed-minded when it came to learning about cultures different from their own.

Although the Parents' Night evoked criticism by a vocal minority of the Social Contexts students, it was viewed very positively by the administrators and teachers of Lewes High. Even if many of the Social Contexts students had not known how to approach parents and pupils on the evening of the Parents' Night, their presence in the school with posters, promotional materials on their colleges and universities, and brightly colored shirts and jackets proclaiming their loyalty to their alma mater had lent an atmosphere of festivity and optimism about the future to the Parents' Night, according to the Lewes High faculty. From their point of view, parents had come to Lewes High, seen roughly 40 Boston College students and instructors walking the hallways and standing behind booths promoting higher education—and this was a great thing, something that had never before occurred (or at least that anyone could remember) in the history of the school. Faculty at the school also believed that it was extremely important that future teachers, such as those in the Social Contexts class, have direct experiences with the many challenges faced by urban teachers who want to establish strong ties with parents but are not always successful in these efforts.

The oppositional students' suggestion that a College Admissions Night be held separately from a Parents' Night was not seen as helpful by the Lewes High faculty, because the goal was to try to persuade parents who had never thought about sending their kids to college to do so. The faculty argued that this goal could best be achieved by first getting the parents to come a Parents' Night and then engaging directly with the many parents who might have thought that college was out of reach for their children and simply would not attend a separate College Admissions Night. When the Social Contexts

instructors shared with the Lewes High faculty and administrators the criticisms of some of their students, Lewes High faculty and administrators expressed anxiety that Boston College might not be involved in Parents' Nights in the future. They viewed this potential withdrawal as a real loss and contended that any discomfort felt by the Social Contexts students was more than compensated for by the possibility to learn first-hand about school and community relationships in the urban environment.

We had, then, a variety of complicated outcomes from this third year's intervention. Teachers, parents, and headmasters at the school were delighted with our participation, but a vocal minority of our own students were angry about it. The school community felt that the Boston College students played an immensely positive role, but some of the teacher candidates strongly disagreed. Even when collaborating instructor Pat Tutwiler, who taught ninth grade at the high school, shared his sense that their participation in the Parents' Night had been an important contribution to the school, oppositional students scarcely seemed to modify their criticisms. What could account for such conflicting interpretations?

One theme that emerged throughout the ensuing analysis was that students were particularly anxious about the Parents' Night activity because of its linkage with their final paper. In the previous year, students had been encouraged to connect their final paper with the Parents' Night, but had the option to write more generally about their philosophy of school and community relationships. Boston College is an expensive, competitive research university; its students are used to getting top grades and being in control; and working in an urban school environment is a poor match for people who need complete control of their environment. So one thing that can be learned from this experience is that faculty can link their courses with the real needs of real schools but should be careful about how they design assessments because of the anxiety that can arise in turbulent urban settings.

A second learning from this experience is that instructors should be mindful of the reality that their students are just that—learners. All of the Social Context instructors in the fall of 2003 had years of experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners in urban schools. The very diversity of our instructional team—with an African American, a Somali American, a Peruvian, and two white Americans—was probably more diversity than the teacher candidates were used to encountering in what appeared to be predominantly, although not exclusively, culturally homogenous and white mainstream backgrounds. Our class of 35 had no African American students and one Latina. For many of our students, the urban high school—let alone the urban housing project—was unfamiliar territory, a setting that they imbued with negative stereotypes. Furthermore, no one had informed them in advance that this required class would be taught in an urban high school—and for those students with no intention of teaching in an urban school, the class was an exercise in coercion that compelled them to go to a setting they never would have gone to on their own accord. Hence another lesson is that teacher educators who want to establish linkages with urban schools is that it may be best to do that explicitly—through entire programs focused on urban children and their environments—and that if they innovate in an otherwise traditional university environment, they should anticipate some student opposition.

Given this unfamiliarity of mainstream college and university students with cultural diversity in urban environments, instructors need to consider carefully how they will plan community interventions. Offering teacher preparatory classes on an overwhelmingly white university campus with little or no contact with students or parents of color strikes us as very limited, even if course readings have a strong social justice component. Teacher candidates need sustained interaction with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and their parents, we suggest, even if they are planning on teaching in private, rural, or suburban schools; one cannot conscientiously enter teaching defining pan-ethnic, white middle-class students as normative and all others as deviant and hence unworthy of focused attention. Offering teacher preparatory classes in a school setting but failing to collaborate with school faculty, pupils, and parents to improve that setting, likewise appears to us as limited.

So how might one proceed with boundary spanning community interventions in the realm of urban teacher education? Here a discussion with a colleague is relevant. One of us, when discussing the fallout from the course with a fellow professor with a distinguished past as a social justice educator, got this response: "If you don't get the reaction you got, you're wasting your time." The ensuing conversation brought back to mind a contention of Alinsky (1965), that "dissonance is the music of democracy" (p. 42). From this point of view, it is poor preparation for teachers in a multicultural democracy to stay in their comfort zones on a university campus, to take classes in which everything is neatly organized and controlled, and never to engage in a clash of ideas that matter not in the abstract, but that matter in *this* school in *this* community at *this* point of time. Rather, teacher education students must be willing to engage with the very really challenges of urban schools in what Whitehead (1929/1967) called "the insistent present"—even if that engagement calls forth a sense of discomfort at being out of place and ill at ease with a building full of culturally and linguistically diverse pupils and their parents (pp. 2–3).

From this perspective, it is an important part of the responsibility of educators with social justice commitments to ensure that precisely those teacher candidates who are least likely to engage with urban youth and

their schools are compelled to do so as part of their teacher preparation. One sympathetic reviewer of this article commented that our instructional team might be well advised not to restructure the course in the future but to counsel oppositional students out of the teaching profession. The line of arguments here is that teaching is a profession that is too open to all applicants, and that many people are admitted to the profession for a variety of reasons that have little to do with teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. From this vantage point critical teacher educators should not be too harsh on themselves for bringing to the surface dispositions among teacher candidates that work against high academic standards for all students. Rather, critical teacher educators should take such dispositions seriously as indicative of attitudes that will undermine the learning of pupils who most need sustained attention.

This perspective is a valuable one, and especially important because teacher educators, who might be especially eager to recruit new teachers into hard-to-staff areas, such as science and mathematics, are often tempted to compromise standards in the interest of assuring an adequate supply of new teachers. Upon reflection, however, the authors of this article are uncomfortable with the implication that we should serve more vigilantly in our role as gatekeepers to the teaching profession as a response to our oppositional students. Rather, we take from this experience a heightened sensitivity to the complex roles of teacher candidates in school and university partnerships and the greater challenges facing us as teacher educators. After all, the teacher candidates in this class had never heard of the Massachusetts Coalition before the first class; nor were they aware of the influential role of Lewes High School's ILT in shaping the Social Context curricula and activities. Educators must accept our students as we find them—not as we wish they would be—and carefully and sensitively scaffold their experiences to broaden their horizons and openness to other points of view. There is a human side to school reform that includes the full range of emotions that educators neglect at our peril. Hence, we view the oppositional students' perspectives as a legitimate and important challenge for us to continue working in the urban environment and to find new ways of engaging our students in urban issues that will lead them to greater curiosity about, and solidarity with, culturally and linguistically diverse learners and their communities.

In spite of the challenges, then, our final assessment of the course is positive. Students saw a professor and collaborating instructors working closely with classroom teachers to address a problem that the teachers themselves saw as critical to raising pupil achievement. Many teacher candidates who had rarely had any contact with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and their parents began a process of dialogue that we hope will continue even if they elect to work in suburban and private school settings. Lewes High School faculty were especially emphatic that the benefits of the school and university collaboration were significant not only for the school and its parents but also for teacher candidates, regardless of whether they assumed positions in urban or rural schools. Many students in their final papers and subsequent interviews stated that although the unpredictable, school-based nature of the course created some anxiety, they found that the variety of new experiences they enjoyed more than compensated for periodic bouts of unease. It is not clear that there is an easy or foolproof way to prepare majority white students from middle-class backgrounds to excel as quality teachers in diverse urban schools, and our course must be seen as part of a continuing work in progress that is part of a broad national agenda to improve teacher quality. Yet it might also be the case that teacher educators should anticipate some resistance when they seek to engage student teachers in boundary spanning activities, especially when they are teaching student teachers in privileged university settings who have little prior experience with urban schools and communities.

OUTCOMES FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS COALITION AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

One final component of our research is relevant here. As indicated by this themed issue of *Equity and Excellence in Education*, the Social Contexts experiment in community engagement through the Boston College/Boston Public Schools partnership was not a stand-alone venture. It was complemented by the other partnerships of the Massachusetts Coalition that also piloted different initiatives to develop strong horizontal ties between their schools and the communities they served. Because the Massachusetts Coalition placed such a premium on preparing teachers who would improve school and community relations, we asked Abt Associates, our external evaluator, to conduct a survey to explore this topic. Abt evaluators worked with the Coalition's Steering Committee and an auxiliary Research Task Force to develop questions and subsequently distributed a survey to cooperating teachers in all of the Coalition schools. Abt evaluators asked the teachers to describe their preservice teachers' attitudes towards parents and their urban communities and they also needed to indicate whether the preservice teachers had been proactive in reaching out to parents and community stakeholders through a variety of activities. The cooperating teachers needed to indicate whether the preservice teachers who worked with them were affiliated with the seven higher education institutions or other colleges and universities. A total of 610 cooperating teachers in 18 urban schools completed the surveys, with a total response rate of 59% (Abt Associates, 2003).

When the results of the Abt survey were released, they were encouraging to the scholars and activists of the Massachusetts Coalition. On most measures there was no difference between preservice teachers prepared at non-Coalition or Coalition institutions, but in the area of community engagement the differences were striking. Forty-four percent of Coalition student teachers versus 34% of non-Coalition student teachers "took the initiative to communicate frequently with parents"; 46% of Coalition student teachers versus 23% of student teachers were familiar with their pupils' neighborhoods; and 46% of Coalition student teachers versus 30% of non-Coalition teachers were "very effective or effective" at "working with community members to support school and classroom learning." While one would like these numbers to be even higher—and the Coalition has continued working diligently in this regard—it is nonetheless hopeful to notice that an entity such as the Massachusetts Coalition apparently is making a difference, as an aggregate, in terms of positive student teacher attitudes toward working with parents and community members.

NOTE

1. For more on this point, see Shirley, 1997, p. 73.

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