

## FINAL REPORT

### Learning to Teach/Teaching to Learn: A Two Day Immersion Experience for Pre-Service Secondary Teachers

#### THE PROJECT

The goal of this project was to study the impact on pre-service secondary teachers of participating in an intensive mini-immersion clinical experience in a unique educational setting.

The participants completed a two-day teaching experience at the Alliance School in Milwaukee, WI. The mission of the Alliance School is to provide “a safe and accepting environment for all students...where it’s okay to be black, white, gay, straight, gothic, Buddhist, Christian, or just plain unique” can help meet this challenge. The Alliance School is based on the Summerhill model which emphasizes a democratic approach to education, with students and teachers as equal stakeholders. Of the student population at Alliance, 50% of the students self-identify as LGBT, 80% receive free or reduced lunch and just fewer than 50% are homeless or in foster care. These factors combined made for a powerful educational setting to host a meaningful clinical experience for pre-service teachers with a diverse student population within a non-traditional school structure.

The participants were 7 pre-service secondary teachers, who represented a variety of content areas and were at various stages in their teacher preparation programs. Of the participants, 4 were seniors who had previous experience both observing classrooms and teaching and would be doing their student teaching the semester following the project experience. Two of the participants were juniors who had also completed observation and classroom teaching hours but would not be student teaching until the following fall, one year after the project. The last participant was a sophomore who had only completed classroom observation hours and would not be doing her student teaching for another two years.

<b>Participant (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Content Area</b>	<b>Year</b>
James	History	Senior
Michelle	Physical Education	Senior
Rachel	Math	Senior
Sara	Math	Senior
Cole	History	Junior
Shana	English	Junior
Carrie	Biology	Sophomore

The participants spent two who days at the Alliance School for this project. Prior to arriving at the school, they had been in contact with their assigned teacher about what they would be teaching and developed a lesson plan for that day. The first day they spent observing in the classroom where they would be teaching the following day. The second day they taught the lessons they had prepared and also assisted their assigned teachers throughout the day.

The participants completed several activities that served data collection measures. First, they researched the school and completed a reflection on what they believed the school’s strengths and challenges were, as well as what they thought they might observe and what they hoped to gain from the

experience. They also participated in an online discussion after the first day at the school observing and another discussion after their second day. In these discussions, they shared their experiences and observations. The participants completed a final reflection one month after they returned from the experience. This was used to gauge how the participants reflected on their experience after they had had more time to process it.

## OUTCOMES

Data analysis revealed four themes of learning outcomes emerged for all of the participants as a result of the two-day experience.

**Teaching diverse populations of learners.** Although all of the participants had completed some kind of observational clinical experience with diverse student populations, they lacked the experience of actually teaching a lesson in that particular environment. The participants were able to begin to see beyond their own understanding of diversity and comfort levels and begin to think about ways to differentiate instruction for their students. They began to recognize that while it is one thing to rewrite a lesson plan that promotes differentiation, it is something very different to put that lesson into practice, and that it is a skill they still need to develop as beginning teachers.

**Deeper perspective on the effects of bullying.** Since one of the foundational aspects of the school in which experience took place is to create a safe environment for all students, the participants were sensitive to the fact that many of the students there had experienced bullying to a degree that they had stopped coming to school or even considered dropping out. The participants also described understanding how the effects of be bullying might manifest in different ways for students. One of the participants reported that this taught her that in the future she would “remember to understand where a student is coming from, instead of just reacting to something they say and do.” All of the students discussed the importance of recognizing how the experiences that students have in an out of school, academic or not, as part of their jobs.

**Negotiating power and control.** Another aspect of this school is the way in which it is structured. Although several of the participants had completed clinical hours at this school before the project, this is a strong departure from what they themselves have as experienced as students. Since another one of the foundations of the school is that it is teacher-led, and that the student take an active role in the decision making process, the participants had to adjust to a range of structural differences in the school, ranging from students calling teachers by their first names, to the absence of a bell system. This challenged the participants to reconsider their roles in the classroom as well as what they understood in terms of power and control amongst teachers and students. The participants also described how the democratic nature of the school as a whole had a positive impact on all of the students. They each commented on how they believed that the school functioned successfully this way because “all of the teachers were on board and supported the policies” and therefore the school’s mission was in practice on a daily basis. This represents a shift in terms of a developing teacher identity for the participants. Where before they were confident that they knew what a teacher’s role is in a classroom, they were beginning to reevaluate how “letting go of power actually gets you some back”.

**Working with middle school students.** Finally, the participants had the opportunity to work directly with the middle school students at the school. For all of the participants, this was their first opportunity to work with and teach middle school students outside of simply observing. All of the participants indicated that they were pursuing the middle school endorsement within their content area teacher preparation program since it entailed simply taking one course during the summer. The participants reported that they had all been encouraged to do this by their advisors because they would be more marketable once they

graduated. Working with actual middle school students, however, proved to be more of a challenge than they had anticipated. The added experience of working with the middle school students led all of the participants to reconsider whether or not they would seek the middle school endorsement option as part of their degree. While not all of the participants had a negative experience with the middle school students, they did all recognize that they needed “more than just one class” to be effective in working with them in the future.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that an intensive clinical experience in a unique school environment can impact pre-service teachers in their beliefs and approaches to working with diverse student populations as well as challenging what they know about schools, school structure and its effect on students. The study has also shown that pre-service teachers benefit from shared clinical experiences that also provide opportunities for them to reflect critically on their experiences both with their peers and with their instructor. In order to prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of public school teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teacher educators must continue to find ways to provide these opportunities to our students by seeking out unique and challenging experiences.