



# Whitely Institute on Community-Engaged Teacher Preparation

Wilisha Scaife, Union Missionary Baptist Church and Ball State University

Eva Zygmunt, Ball State University

## Overview

In 2009, teacher educators from Ball State University and members of the Whitely neighborhood of Muncie, Indiana, embarked on a unique collaboration. Born from a community-identified need to develop educators who know and understand community funds of knowledge and cultural wealth, the partnership – called the “Schools Within the Context of Community” (SCC) program - has become a nationally recognized model grounded in a radically reciprocal approach to educator preparation. The program is structured so teacher candidates have a chance to leave the university and join the community context for an integrated 18-credit semester.<sup>1</sup>

The innovation described in this brief, the Whitely Institute on Community-Engaged Teacher Preparation (Institute), is an evolution of the SCC model. Initiated by members of the Whitely community, the Institute, designed for pre-service and practicing teachers, broadens the SCC model by amplifying the principles of authentic family and community engagement through a new teacher orientation and a community seminar series. This project formalizes a shift from preparation taking place mainly in the university to its rightful proprietorship in the community.

### PROJECT PARTNERS

**Union Missionary Baptist Church**, the largest congregation in the Whitely neighborhood, that continues the legacy of faith-based leaders from the Civil Rights Movement whose leadership inspired and paved the way for equitable education.

#### **Ball State University**

**The Whitely Community**, a historically African American neighborhood in Muncie, Indiana

#### **Muncie Community Schools (MCS)**

**Department chairs from Ball State University’s Teachers College**

## The Innovation

The Whitley Institute on Community-Engaged Teacher Preparation centered around two main activities:

- **“Welcome to Whitley” orientation Seminar:** Teacher candidates, community educators, and community members participated in an orientation seminar held prior to the beginning of teacher candidates’ practicum experience at the elementary school. The seminar addressed the problematic nature of practicum students who are frequently “deposited” upon schools, absent any community cultural context. With ample research to suggest that the schema teacher candidates hold for traditionally marginalized and minoritized communities is deficit-laden, the “Welcome to Whitley” seminar provided an opportunity to challenge teacher candidates’ perceptions, perspectives, and potential positionality as “saviors” of neighborhood children and families. The two-hour seminar introduced teacher candidates to the history, wealth, love, and reverence that community members hold for children, their patent and persistent value of education.
- **Community “educator forums”:** During a series of six forums, Whitley community members, families, educators, and teacher candidates joined together to reflect and build on community and cultural wealth within the context of children’s literature. Specifically, the partners worked together to identify children’s books that elevate Black agency, joy, and love so educators could use these books in their classrooms. These forums are based on the unfortunate truth that literature that Non-White students are exposed to centers Whiteness in terms of story characters and their lived experience. Black children have limited opportunities to read books that are culturally relevant to them because they are navigating an education system that does not recognize the wealth their communities bring.

## Outcomes

The collaboration collected data through post-experience surveys and courageous conversations where participants articulated the impact of the experiences on their attitudes, beliefs, and teaching practices.<sup>2</sup>

### Teacher candidates increased knowledge of families and the community and in turn improved their teaching practice.

Immediately after participating in the Whitley Seminar, as well as at the end of the semester, teacher candidates completed an experience survey. The surveys asked questions about the concept of community cultural wealth, their experiences with members of the community, and the extent to which they perceived that the seminar impacted their practice during their practicum experience at the elementary school. Overall data showed:



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- **Candidates learned about the richness of the community.** One candidate commented, *“The seminar connected the history of civil rights to the community we’re serving, which I may not have connected on my own. It also provided an excellent example of the greatness of the community the relationships that are present among community members.”* Another added, *“It showed me how closely all members of the community work together and what they value.”*
- **Candidates gained awareness of the strengths of the community in responding to adversity.** For example, one candidate said, *“The amount of courage that members of the community have in standing up to injustice is really amazing to me”* while another stated, *“I wasn’t prepared to learn how deep and meaningful the stories of community mobilization were, and how that gives Whitley a cultural identity.”*
- **Candidates felt overwhelming gratitude for the hospitality bestowed upon them as visitors in the community.** Candidates reflected, *“With this visit, I learned that people within the community are welcoming to those of us who may even have heard and believed misconceptions*

about the neighborhood. They were gracious in sharing with us that Whately is not what some people say it is." Another added, "I feel as though they have invited me into their home and wanted for me to experience what they treasure so much."

- **Candidates affirmed that they would approach their work in the school differently.** Candidates also acknowledged the importance of understanding students' community and culture. Candidates stated, "I will be able to contextualize the work I am doing in a more significant way." "Having an understanding of the community and its values will encourage me to strive to meet community expectations for children's education." "I will consider my students' backgrounds and strive to build relationships and to teach in a way that is culturally responsive."
- **Candidates changed their mindsets.** Candidates articulate at the end of the semester that the visit was instrumental in changing and interrupting their previous mindset about the community and thus, altering their practice. "I feel like the seminar encouraged me to raise my expectations for students based on the strength of the community from which they come." "The interaction impacted my mindset by helping me understand how committed the school and community are to achievement and success." "The history and background of the community was instrumental in guiding me in how to properly teach the students."

### Teacher educators found ways to increase connections between the course content for teacher candidates and the community.

Teacher educators credited the Institute for improving how education candidates questioned their deeply held beliefs about what they thought they might know about the Whately community. A teacher educator also expressed how the

Institute helped build connections for students between course content and field experiences and brought ideas to life. For example, one teacher educator commented, "We read two books this semester prior to beginning our practicum. 'Cultivating Genius' by Gholdy Muhammad, and 'We Got This' by Cornelius Minor. When we visited, we were halfway through these texts, so we were able to connect those readings and what we were learning to the context of the Whately community. We talk in class a lot about the difference between reading about something and experiencing it. The introductory seminar helped bring these ideas to life for my students."

### Practicing educators deepened understanding of community strengths.

Thirty practicing educators completed surveys about their experience engaging in the community educator forums. Practicing educators' reflections revealed that they deepened their understanding of the community's strengths and valued the unique insight community members held about literature. For example, one educator wrote, "Having a community member speak about the books spoke wonders to me. Passion is something that can only be exuded by people in the community when it comes to things like this and EVERY speaker there was full of passion, which really makes the message hit home." Another added, "I have lived in Muncie for almost 25 years and this was one of the most moving experiences I have ever had."

### Community members reinforced their leadership role and pride in the community.

Community members who were leaders in the forums were also positively impacted by their experience. They reflected on how connecting with known and new teachers would benefit children and the community as a whole. They also felt buoyed in their role as community leaders. For example, one community member commented, "It was important for





me to connect with educators I have known for a long time, as well as new teachers who could benefit from learning about the wealth of the community in which they teach.” Another added, “I appreciate that members of the community are elevated as the ‘experts’ about the wealth of their own community.”

### **The community gained a new canon of literature.**

As a culminating event, teacher candidates and members of the community gathered at a Whitley Community Council meeting to review children’s literature emblematic of community aspirational, linguistic, and cultural wealth. At a time when over 30 state legislatures across the U.S. have introduced bills to limit discussions of racial history, and more than 300 books by predominantly Black authors have been banned, the group selected 21 titles that demonstrate the love and joy of the Black community to form the Whitley Neighborhood Canon of Children’s Literature Exemplifying Community Cultural Wealth. This experience was also replicated with nearly 100 children at the elementary school in order to glean their perspective on the collection. As a result, and with respect for children’s opinions, 10 new titles were added to the canon. This canon will now be widely distributed throughout the neighborhood at spaces and places where children gather including community centers, early childhood programs, churches, and barber shops.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Taken together this project shows that authentic engagement of families and communities in the education of children requires the concerted cultivation of relationships. The sharing of community wisdom, expertise, and cultural wealth has a direct impact on teacher candidates and teacher educators, as well as on the community members whose wisdom and expertise are foregrounded in this work. The project has sparked interest, enthusiasm, and investment in the community-engaged educator preparation model and has helped to bring in resources to continue to expand and grow the approach.

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<sup>1</sup>Zygmunt, E., Cipollone, K., Tancock, S., Clausen, J., Clark, P., & Mucherah, W. (2018). *Loving out loud: Community mentors, teacher candidates, and transformational learning through a pedagogy of care and connection*. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(2), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117751640>

<sup>2</sup>In total, 18 early childhood and 19 elementary educators from Ball State University participated in the project and 6 family navigators, 6 assistant principals, and 13 new teachers from Muncie Community Schools.

# Whitely Community Cultural Wealth Canon of Children's Literature

**Aspirational Capital:** The ability to maintain hope and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers

- *That is My Dream*, by Langston Hughes
- *Dear Black Boy*, by Martellus Bennett
- *Crown: Ode to the Fresh Cut*, by Derrick Barnes
- *Rise! From Caged Bird to Poet of the People*, Maya Angelou, by Bethany Hegedus
- *Milo Imagines the World*, by Matt de la Pena

**Linguistic Capital:** The ability for students to develop varying communication styles through lived experience

- *Stacey's Extraordinary Words*, by Stacy Abrahams
- *Hip Hop Speaks to Children*, by Nikki Giovanni
- *Your Name is a Song*, by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow
- *Preaching to the Chickens: The Story of Young John Lewis*, by Jabari Asim
- *Hair Love*, by Matthew Cherry

**Familial and Social Capital:** The social and personal human resources students have in their environment, drawn from their extended familial and community networks

- *Me and Mama*, by Cozbi Cabrera
- *Daddy Speaks Love*, by Leah Henderson
- *Going Down Home with Daddy*, by Kelly Starling Lyons

**Navigational Capital:** The ability to navigate "social institutions," including educational spaces, and to maneuver within unsupportive or hostile environments

- *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles
- *Opal Lee and What it Means to be Free*, by Alice Faye Duncan
- *The Undefeated*, by Kwame Alexander
- *Sulwe*, by Lupita Nyong'o

**Resistance Capital:** The ability to secure equal rights and collective freedom, learned from parents, community members and an historical legacy of engaging in the work of social justice

- *I Am Every Good Thing*, by Derrick Barnes
- *These Hands*, by Margaret Mason
- *All Because You Matter*, by Tami Charles
- *The 1619 Project: Born on the Water*, by Hannah-Jones



The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) is the first membership association focused solely on advancing family, school, and community engagement. Our mission is advancing high-impact policies and practices for family, school, and community engagement to promote child development and improve student achievement. This research-to-practice brief was developed as part of NAFSCE's Family Engagement and Educator Preparation Impact Project, the goal of which is to fund local innovations in testing components of the Educator Preparation Framework for Family and Community Engagement. We wish to acknowledge Dr. Margaret Caspe and Elia Hilda Bueno for their research and writing support. You can learn more about NAFSCE's work at: [www.nafsce.org/edprep](http://www.nafsce.org/edprep).