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Connie Schaffer

University of Nebraska at Omaha, cschaffer@unomaha.edu

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Urban Immersion: Working to Dispel the Myths of Urban Schools and Preparing Teachers to Work with Diverse and Economically Disadvantaged Students

By Connie L. Schaffer

This descriptive research investigated the impact of a unique program that partnered an urban K-12 school district and an urban university. The goals of the program were to dispel common misperceptions of urban K-12 schools and to prepare preservice teachers to teach in diverse school settings. The program provided an authentic teaching experience for 35 preservice teachers, completely immersing them and their university instructors in urban schools, working and learning side-by-side with the K-12 teachers and students. Initial results indicated the program was successful in achieving its goals. The program assisted in reframing how preservice teachers perceived urban teaching opportunities and the challenges of teaching and learning in urban school environments, as well as increasing their confidence for teaching in urban schools. The program shows promise as a way to address the urgent challenge of recruiting effective teachers to teach in urban settings.

The Problem: Too Few Teachers with Too Little Preparation

The future population growth of the United States continues to be in urban areas (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2010). This will result in an increased need for teachers who are prepared and willing to meet the challenges and opportunities of working in urban school settings that often have great cultural diversity in their student populations and a high number of students who are economically disadvantaged. Urban schools often have a reputation of being difficult environments for teachers, particularly in light of accountability language and media attention that has labeled many urban schools as *failing* (Haberman, 2000).

Literature Review

Preservice teachers often report feeling unprepared or having low confidence in their ability to teach in urban schools (Burstein, Czech, Kretschmer, Lombardi, & Smith, 2009;

Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002). This sense of being *unprepared* is supported by additional research that indicates teachers are not prepared to meet the demands of the increasingly diverse populations of urban schools (Nieto, 1992; Sleeter, 2001). This is concerning information for the education profession given that demographic trends in the United States indicate the future demand for teachers will be greatest in urban schools.

Teacher preparation programs recognize the need to prepare preservice teachers better to work in urban schools (Jacob, 2007). Approaches taken by institutions to prepare future teachers more effectively for success in urban schools have included initiatives to (a) increase the sociocultural competence of preservice teachers, (b) foster dispositions in which preservice teachers have high expectations for student achievement, (c) build the collaborative skills of preservice teachers, and (d) teach preservice teachers the instructional strategies that promote learning within diverse populations (Voltz, Collins, Patterson, & Sims, 2008).

Although such competencies can be taught on a university campus in teacher preparation courses, teacher educators believe the most effective way to learn these or any teaching competency or skill is to couple coursework with field experiences (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). Field experiences are a part of nearly every accredited teacher preparation program (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008; Teacher Education Accreditation Council, 2010). In these experiences, preservice teachers observe, interact, and have teaching opportunities in K-12 schools. While participating in these experiences, preservice teachers can begin to challenge their existing and often highly ingrained perceptions and assumptions about schools, perceptions that have developed over the numerous years they themselves have spent as K-12 students (Lortie, 1975). Their participation in urban school experiences has the potential to address these perceptions and specifically those related to the teachers and students who work in and attend urban schools (Haberman & Post, 1992; McDermott, Johnson Rothenberg, & Gormley, 1999; Olmedo, 1997).

Regardless of the geographic setting of the school (urban, suburban, or rural), field experiences are most effective when they are attached to university courses and the preservice teacher participants are closely mentored (Darling-Hammond, 2005). It is not surprising that teacher preparation programs have looked to field experiences that take place in urban schools as a possible means to better prepare preservice teachers to work in these settings (Haberman, 1987; Foote & Cook-Cottone, 2004). The results of such efforts have been mixed (Mason, 1999; Sleeter, 2001). Urban-based field experiences appear most promising when the experience is tied to coursework and is closely supervised (Foote & Cook-Cottone, 2004; Mason, 1997; Olmedo, 1997). Ideally, the urban field experiences also should be extensive (a minimum of 30 hours) and should take place in high-quality urban schools in which preservice teachers can observe multiple models of effective teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Voltz et al., 2008).

In addition to tying urban field experiences to teacher preparation coursework, school-university partnerships also show promise in improving preservice teachers' ability to work in urban school settings (Sykes & Dibner, 2009). The recommendation for school-university

Connie L. Schaffer, EdD, is Coordinator of Field Experiences at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and a member of Omega Chapter (NE) of Delta Kappa Gamma. She is also active in Phi Delta Kappa, Association of Teacher Educators, and the Horace Mann Society. cschaffer@unomaha.edu



partnerships is not new. Both the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy and the Holmes Group made this recommendation in the mid 1980s (Sleeter, 2001.) Partnerships can enhance the quality of field experiences because feedback is more readily shared when the relationship between the school and university is strong (Dean, Lauer, & Urquhart, 2005).

Methodology

Purpose of study. The researcher gathered descriptive data based on a pre- and postexperience survey in which participants self-assessed items related to their perceptions of urban schools and their confidence to teach in an urban setting. The researcher investigated a number of elements that, in isolation, have shown promise in improving preservice teacher preparation relative to teaching in an urban setting. The purpose of the research was to examine changes in preservice teachers' perceptions of urban schools and their confidence in their ability to be effective teachers in an urban school after completing field experiences that were (a) located in an urban school, (b) a product of a school-university partnership, (c) extended in nature, (d) coupled with university coursework, and (e) closely supervised.

Participant selection. Participants were preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation courses that were part of the Urban Immersion Program at a large university in the midwest United States. The program was comprised of two courses: (a) Human Growth and Learning (HGL), and (b) The Art and Science of Teaching in Secondary Schools (ASTS). The preservice teachers in HGL were in their first course after being admitted to the teacher preparation program and had no previous field experiences. Twenty students were selected for HGL based on an established grade point average of 3.0 or greater and faculty recommendation. Preservice teachers in ASTS had completed approximately 75% of the teacher preparation program and more than 50 hours of previous field experiences. Fourteen preservice teachers were selected for ASTS based on a 3.0 grade point average and their subject area. In both courses, class size was limited in order to make certain the schools had adequate teachers to work with the preservice teachers.

One student in the program elected not to participate in the study. Thus, the final sample included 15 males and 19 females. Eight were elementary education majors, and 22 were secondary education majors. Four candidates were in programs that prepare preservice teachers to teach grades K-12. Participants were asked to categorize their community of origin as being rural, small town, suburban, or urban. Five candidates identified as being from a rural community, 12 from a small town community, 12 from a suburban community, and 6 from an urban community. One participant identified with two community groups.

Data collection. Participants completed a preexperience survey on the first day of the course. The survey consisted of 28 items that the preservice teachers rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The survey items were selected based on a review of the literature related to preparing preservice teachers to teach in urban settings. Items were reviewed by the faculty members teaching the courses and administrators in the partnering school district. A 4-point Likert scale prevented neutral responses and required participants to indicate level of *agreement* or *disagreement* for each item.

Participants then completed a 4-week course and corresponding urban-school field experience that was a partnership between the university and a large urban school district. The experience immersed the preservice teachers in urban school settings for more than 50 hours. Both course instruction and field experiences were delivered in K-12 urban school

buildings during summer school, thus allowing the preservice teachers to be in the schools for the complete summer school cycle and nearly the entire summer school day. HGL was delivered in an elementary school for 2 weeks and a middle school for 2 weeks. ASTS was delivered in a high school setting. The student demographics for these schools are found in Table 1.

Table 1
School Demographics

School	Enrollment	ELL rates	Free & reduced lunch rates	Mobility rates	Ethnicity rates
Elementary	700	65%	85%	14%	90% minority primarily Hispanic
Middle	300	2%	76%	36%	75% minority primarily Black, not Hispanic
High	2000	< 1%	63%	29%	75% minority primarily Black, not Hispanic
State average	-	6%	41%	12%	74% White, not Hispanic

Note. ELL = English Language Learners. Free & reduced lunch = low-income status.

This arrangement created extended experiences in which preservice teachers were immersed in a naturalistic urban school setting. Furthermore, as the university faculty members delivered on-site course instruction, the arrangement provided the faculty members the opportunity to supervise closely the field experiences of the preservice teachers who were enrolled in their courses and for the preservice teachers to debrief with their instructors and peers immediately following observations and interactions with the K-12 students and teachers.

After finishing the experience, the participants were asked to complete a postexperience survey that included the same items as the preexperience survey. Additionally, this survey provided the option for open-ended responses to prompts related to the most valuable aspect of the experience and suggestions for improving the experience.

Pre- and postexperience surveys were analyzed to provide data related to the following research questions:

1. To what extent did the Urban Immersion Program change preservice teachers' perceptions of urban schools?
2. To what extent did the Urban Immersion Program change what influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of urban schools?
3. To what extent did the Urban Immersion Program change preservice teachers' sense of their preparedness to teach in urban schools?
4. To what extent did the Urban Immersion Program change preservice teachers' desire to student teach or teach in an urban school?

Findings

General findings. The findings overwhelmingly support the existing research related to preservice field experiences. In addition, the data provide strong indication that candidates, regardless of progression in their preparation program, area of teaching interest, gender, or community of origin, were impacted by the program.

Preservice teachers who completed the Urban Immersion Program changed their perceptions of urban schools and of the teachers and students who work and learn in those schools. After completing the experience, their perceptions were less influenced by the media and to a greater extent based on their own direct experience. The participants, across demographic groups, felt more prepared to teach in urban schools and more interested in doing so.

Data analysis. Analysis of data included the examination of the aggregated data (see Table 2.) Data were also disaggregated by (a) course, (b) gender, (c) participant's community of origin as identified by the participant (rural, small town, suburban, or urban), and (d) program level (elementary, secondary, or K-12).

Aggregated data indicated the program was successful in changing the participants' perceptions of urban schools. Postexperience survey data confirmed that preservice teachers believed they had a much more accurate perception of urban schools. Prior to the experience, the average response to the survey item related to having an accurate perception of K-12 urban schools was 2.63 on a 4.0 scale. Following the experience, the average response was 3.47. Upon completion of the experience, participants also reported their perceptions of urban schools were more influenced by their own experiences and less influenced by the media.

In addition, participants reported an increased understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by both teachers and students in urban schools. The greatest change was found in relationship to understanding the opportunities for urban teachers.

The survey included 11 items related to participants' self-reported preparation for teaching in an urban school setting. On each of these items, participants reported feeling more prepared after completing the program. As one preservice candidate noted, "Being in class with an experienced teacher and the entire Urban Immersion Program gives me a comfort base that I hadn't had before." Particularly strong growth was noted in feeling prepared to (a) teach students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds; and (b) connect with the daily lives of students.

The preservice teachers expressed more interest in student teaching and teaching in an urban school on the postexperience survey than on the preexperience survey. In addition, after completing the Urban Immersion Program, preservice teachers believed their preparation program had better prepared them to meet the needs of students in urban school settings. Several preservice teachers indicated the Urban Immersion Program was the *best* preparation they had experienced in their programs. Comments from the preservice candidates indicated they valued the day-to-day experience as well as the opportunities to discuss their observations with their peers and instructors during the portion of the day when they were in their course sessions.

Few differences appeared between preservice teachers who were enrolled in HGL or ASTS. Participants in ASTS reported a greater change in their interest in student teaching or teaching in urban school settings. This may be attributed to their program progression: The preservice teachers in ASTS were typically within one or two semesters of student teaching. Those in HGL were typically within three to four semesters of student teaching.

Table 2
Pre- and Postexperience Scores on Survey Items

	Question	Pre	Post
1	I feel comfortable in K-12 school settings.	3.47	3.74
2	I feel comfortable in K-12 urban school settings.	3.00	3.62
3	I have an accurate perception of K-12 schools.	3.09	3.59
4	I have an accurate perception of K-12 urban schools.	2.63	3.47
	My perception of K-12 schools is most influenced by:		
5.1	my own experiences.	3.53	3.82
5.2	the media.	2.33	2.21
5.3	past college course work.	3.00	3.33
	My perception of K-12 urban schools is most influenced by:		
6.1	my own experiences.	2.68	3.53
6.2	the media.	2.61	2.24
6.3	past college course work.	3.03	3.18
7	I understand the opportunities for teachers in urban school settings.	2.76	3.62
8	I understand the challenges for teachers in urban school settings.	2.97	3.63
9	I understand the opportunities for K-12 students in the urban school settings.	2.76	3.54
10	I understand the challenges for K-12 students in the urban school settings.	2.94	3.66
	If I student teach or teach in an urban school setting, I feel prepared to:		
11.1	build effective rapport with my students.	3.18	3.74
11.2	teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds.	3.12	3.74
11.3	teach students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.	2.35	3.06
11.4	teach students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.	3.07	3.72
11.5	plan effective lessons	3.19	3.60
11.6	differentiate instruction	3.10	3.60
11.7	connect content to the daily lives of students	2.97	3.68
11.8	manage classroom behavior	3.00	3.47
11.9	positively impact student learning	3.32	3.79
11.10	communicate with parents	3.06	3.65
11.11	collaborate with colleagues	3.24	3.76
12	I feel my teacher preparation program has prepared me to meet the needs of students in urban school settings.	2.94	3.50
13	I would like to student teach in an urban school setting.	2.88	3.34
14	I am likely to apply for a teaching position in an urban school setting.	2.77	3.31

Note. All ratings on Likert Scale: *Strongly Agree* (4), *Agree* (3), *Disagree* (2), *Strongly Disagree* (1)

Female (n=19) participants showed greater change in perceptions and sense of preparedness than males (n=15). This was particularly evident in the responses related to feeling comfortable in urban schools. The ratings for males increased from 3.20 on the preexperience survey to 3.73 on the postexperience survey. The ratings for females increased from 2.84 on the preexperience survey to 3.52 on the postexperience survey. There were also greater changes for females than males on the items related to feeling prepared to teach students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Overall, the five participants who identified as being from rural communities experienced greater changes than their small town, suburban, and urban peers. The greatest changes for the rural candidates were in their reported understanding of the opportunities and challenges of teachers and students in urban schools and in their feelings of preparedness to teach students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The elementary, secondary, and K-12 participants did not demonstrate much difference in the changes reflected via the pre- and postexperience surveys. Elementary participants did demonstrate notable change, however, related to their understanding of the opportunities for teachers and students in urban schools settings. The average preexperience rating regarding the opportunities for urban teachers was 2.62; the average postexperience rating was 3.62. The average preexperience rating regarding the opportunities for urban students was 2.62; the average postexperience rating was 3.50.

K-12 participants showed a similar change related to their understanding of the opportunities for urban teachers. They also reported a notable change in their understanding of the challenges for urban teachers. The average preexperience rating for both items was 2.75; the average postexperience rating for both items was 3.75.

Implications

The potential for new and beginning teachers. Teacher educators must take action to design experiences of both depth and breadth that allow preservice candidates to experience the urban school environment. Traditional university lectures, anecdotal accounts, and limited observations do not afford preservice teachers the opportunity to disassemble their existing perceptions and rebuild new and more accurate perceptions based on first-hand experiences.

Programs that provide field experiences in an urban school coupled with on-site course delivery can provide preservice candidates not only the opportunity to retool their perceptions but to do so under the guidance of their course instructor. The course instructor is able to provide immediate and direct feedback to preservice teachers, helping them to connect what they are experiencing to what they have studied in class. Experiences and theory are no longer in isolation or loosely connected. Rather, they are immediately joined together, providing powerful learning opportunities—opportunities recognized by the preservice teachers and also by the students they will teach in the future.

The potential for urban schools. Beginning teachers may be drawn to financial incentives or loan-forgiveness programs that are tied to teaching in high-need urban schools. Although noble in their efforts, these programs may do little to recruit or retain teachers in these settings.

However, beginning teachers who are interested in teaching in urban schools and who feel prepared to do so will draw on both intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards for teaching in these settings. Urban school administrators seeking to recruit and retain teachers may be in a much better position to do so if they can find ways to partner with teacher preparation

programs to provide extensive experiences in urban schools. Teachers who want to teach in urban schools and are confident in their abilities to do so have the potential to become the next generation of great urban teachers ready to meet the challenges they will face and capitalize on the opportunities presented to them.

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