

# Pre-service Teachers' Reasons for Selecting Urban Teaching

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## Abstract

*This article is a description of the perceptions of pre-service teachers who have chosen to study in a teacher education program designed specifically to prepare them to work in urban elementary schools. Twelve volunteer participants were interviewed in the spring following their admission into the program. Participants and the researcher also made weekly interactive electronic journal entries. In this article, data related to pre-service teachers' reasons for deciding to teach in urban settings are reported and discussed. Professionals interested in urban teaching and teacher education will find these initial findings useful as they select, plan for, and support those preparing to work in urban schools.*

The purpose of this article is to report findings from the first stages of a longitudinal study of the perspectives of new professionals on teaching in urban settings. The overall study will track a cohort of individuals from their entry into a teacher preparation program through their first three years of teaching. This article is a description of the perceptions of pre-service teachers who have chosen to study in a teacher education program designed specifically to prepare them to work in urban elementary schools.

The teacher education program into which the participants have been selected is rooted in a strong orientation toward preparing individuals to teach in a complex, multicultural society. Students must apply for admission and sit for an interview before being accepted into the program. This Urban-Multicultural Teacher Education Program is built on a 5-year teacher preparation model, including a full-year's internship in urban school settings. The expressed purpose of the program is to prepare teachers who will be effective in urban settings and who will stay in those settings as their careers unfold. The theoretical foundations of the program include elements related to multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, and urban education (e.g., Banks, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In terms of method, this study is grounded in critical/feminist ontology and epistemology (Hatch, 2002). The researcher sees himself as an active agent for social change, treating this project as a way to gather information about new teachers' perspectives at the same time he is trying to support their emerging understandings of what it means to teach in urban schools serving mostly African-American children and families. The research is self-consciously transformative in nature (Carr, 1995; Giroux, 1988). It is based on the assumption that the researcher and participants will interact together in ways that can lead to positive change that transforms the lives of participants and improves their abilities to contribute to the communities in which they will teach.

Data for the longitudinal study will include transcripts of open-ended interviews and participant-researcher interactive journal writing via email. For this report, twelve volunteer participants were interviewed for approximately one hour each in the spring following their admission into the Urban-Multicultural Teacher Education Program. Interviews were open-ended conversations based on a set of guiding questions developed by the researcher. The focus of the interviews was on capturing participants' perspectives on teaching in urban settings at this early stage of their preparation. Participants who volunteered for the longitudinal study agreed to join the researcher in an ongoing dialog about their experience of becoming urban teachers, the dialog to be accomplished through electronic exchanges via email. For this study, participants and the researcher made weekly interactive electronic journal entries during the spring semester.

Data analysis was guided by Hatch's (2002, p. 192) description of the "political data analysis model." The model includes inductive and deductive processes for revealing the perspectives of participants. It provides a rigorous method for generating data-based findings, while acknowledging the political positioning of the researcher. Interview and journal data were initially parsed by typologies related to reasons for deciding to teach in urban settings, beliefs about urban contexts, and beliefs about urban teaching. Potential generalizations within each typology were generated from an inductive search for patterns, connections, and themes. These hypothetical generalizations were then deductively checked against the entire data set, leaving those findings that were solidly grounded in the data. In this article, only findings from the data directly tied to pre-service teachers' reasons for selecting urban teaching are reported.

Twelve newly admitted students volunteered to participate in the longitudinal study. Demographic information about the participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Race
Reina	F	21	EA
Judy	F	23	EA
Becky	F	24	EA
Johnetta	F	23	EA
Venessa	F	22	AA
Janet	F	25	AA
Annette	F	21	AA
Elsie	F	34	EA
MacKenzie	F	21	EA
Ernest	M	44	AA
Cheryl Ann	F	24	EA
Julie	F	32	EA

As the table shows, 11 of the 12 students were women, eight were European-American and four were African-American, and their ages ranged from 21 to 44 years. Because of the requirements of the teacher education program in which the urban-multicultural option is imbedded, all of the students had earned a bachelor's degree (with an arts and sciences major) or were in the final stages of completing such a degree at the time of the study. In this program, a one-year

internship in urban schools, with accompanying coursework, is completed at the master's degree level. Students experience their urban teacher education preparation as a cohort group, and all members of the 2006 entering cohort were invited to join the three-year study. The twelve volunteers signed IRB-approved informed consent agreements that outlined the requirements of participation and stipulated that their involvement was entirely voluntary.

As findings are reported below, data excerpts from interview and reflective journal entries are used to support the generalizations presented. Each excerpt includes identification of the speaker/writer of the quoted material using pseudonyms selected by or assigned to the students, and either an (I) for interview or an (R) for reflective journal entry follows the participant's name. This article reports generalizations that held up across the data for this cohort of pre-service urban teachers, and data excerpts were selected that represent the perceptions of the group. What is necessarily lost in any article-length report of findings is a rich understanding of the individual histories and personalities of the research participants. Given that limitation, what follows is a set of descriptive findings regarding this group of aspiring teachers' perspectives on their decisions to enter urban teaching.

### **Descriptive Findings: Reasons for Deciding to Teach in Urban Settings**

All of the pre-service teachers in this study identified their desire to have a positive influence as a central factor in their decision to become an urban elementary school teacher. Two dimensions to their need to make a difference emerged from the analysis. They wanted to have a positive influence on the life chances of urban children; and they wanted to have a positive impact on the direction of society. Julie's journal entry reflects the commitment to helping urban children found across the group:

*Julie (R): I feel thankful I am in the program so that I can be one of those people who steps into these children's lives and helps make their future just as positive and successful as a child who is not growing up in an urban community.*

One of Cheryl Ann's entries reveals a desire expressed by many in the group to make a difference in terms of influencing positive change beyond the direct impact they hope to have on individual children's lives:

*Cheryl Ann (R): The urban setting provides the strongest opportunities to implement change in our society, both in education and social reform. These are the things I would like to be involved in.*

Many of the participants expressed a commitment to working in urban settings that rose to the level of acting on a moral imperative. While none of these teachers-to-be made any direct reference to thinking of urban teaching as a "calling" (religious or otherwise), several described their desire to teach in urban schools in terms that signaled deep moral compulsions that went beyond being attracted to helping urban children and society. Reina's excerpt is an example:

*Reina (R): I decided that I could not stand back and watch these children turn into statistics. I see the tears of these children I work with and their outbursts of anger, and it would be wrong to turn my back and look the other way.*

As a group, these students were quite savvy about urban teaching, and they reported that they were attracted to the challenge. In the texts and subtexts of the interview and journal data, evidence shows that students perceived urban schools to be difficult places to work (in relation to suburban and rural schools) and that they welcomed the challenge of overcoming those difficulties. MacKenzie speaks for herself and others:

*MacKenzie (R): I find that a big benefit of teaching in an urban setting is the challenge of it. I thoroughly enjoy challenges and although from time to time things may fail or mess up, it is the only real way to learn new things.*

These pre-service teachers also chose an urban teacher preparation program because they wanted to teach in settings with which they were familiar. All of the individuals in this cohort had some level of direct experience living, working, and/or volunteering in urban settings. Each of the four African-American students and several of the European-American students reported that they were raised in urban settings. These participants described their familiarity with urban schools and communities as a reason for wanting to teach in such places. As Ernest noted in his interview,

*Ernest (I): My first preference would be an urban school. I was raised in an urban area, lived in urban areas, worked in urban areas. I see where the need is in urban areas. I feel more comfortable in those surroundings, actually.*

Even those who spent their childhoods in suburban or rural settings had some familiarity with urban contexts. Urban experiences across the group included a wide range of paid experiences from teaching in urban parochial schools to serving as a social worker in urban settings to working in day care and after-school programs for urban children. Others had volunteered time in urban educational contexts through church, high school, university, and sorority/service club activities. Becky describes the positive connections she has made through her work experiences in urban contexts:

*Becky (I): I definitely realize the challenges, especially being in the schools and interacting with the children. Working with them in the community and knowing as much about their background as I feel I do, there is a certain bond that I feel like I already have with them.*

A final category of reasons for selecting urban teacher education is connected to positives associated with teaching in urban schools/communities. Understanding that these pre-service teachers were highly motivated to make a difference (see above), it is not a surprise that they saw opportunities to work alongside caring and dedicated urban teachers as a positive. Even though her research interview happened only a few weeks into her program, Johnetta was impressed with the atmosphere of the urban schools she was visiting:

*Johnetta (I): It is almost like wow! I did not even know that there were schools like this. It is like the kids are so eager to learn. And the teachers are not just teachers, but they are there for the students. I mean you just walk in and you can feel the whole rapport of everybody there.*

Another positive identified by many participants had to do with the attention being paid to urban schools by governmental and other funding agencies. While the attention and funding was seen as a double-edged sword, Venessa and her colleagues saw advantages that attracted them to urban teaching:

*Venessa (R): Though many governmental pressures are put on urban settings, teaching in these settings means that there is more governmental involvement, more grants that could become available, and more programs set up to improve these settings. Although this is a recent occurrence, it is beneficial in teaching because there are more materials available and the most current methods of teaching are used—and some of the current methods are very successful.*

In this findings section, pre-service teachers' reasons for deciding to focus their teacher preparation on urban teaching have been described. Categories that organized these reasons included: their desire to have a positive influence; their need to fulfill a moral imperative; their attraction to meeting a challenge; their desire to teach in familiar surroundings; and their attraction to positive attributes that they associate with urban schools. In the following sections, these findings are discussed and implications are presented.

## **Discussion**

The findings represent patterns of response across twelve individual participants. No single individual would connect with all of the descriptors, and no single descriptor would connect to all of the participants. As noted above, differences in perspectives based on personality, race, age, gender, and background influences are not highlighted in this kind of analysis. Still, the findings are useful for understanding the motives of prospective and matriculating urban teacher education students and shaping the experiences they receive as part of their preparation. Below are some interpretations that will be used to inform future interactions with these students during their internship experience and beyond.

There is no intent here to mark these students (or others with similar beliefs and feelings) as wrong, deficient, naive, or bigoted. The whole purpose of this program and this study is to take students where they are and move them forward as successful urban educators. An important part of that forward movement involves processes of “becoming multicultural” (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2005, p. 133), including the development of a “critical social consciousness” (Ford & Dillard, 1996, p. 234). These key elements are seen as developmental processes, and these students are seen as “becoming” professionals in all the dimensions of their work.

Participants' commitment to making a positive difference and their sense of moral responsibility might be interpreted as evidence that they see urban contexts as being in need of fixing and that they are capable of and responsible for erasing or meliorating perceived deficits. To the extent that these deficit-driven assumptions are not critically challenged, these future teachers and others like them are in danger of projecting ethnocentric values on what they perceive to be less-than-normal “others.” They would certainly not be alone in holding (or enacting) such beliefs (Phillips & Hatch, 2000; Swartz, 2003). However, not recognizing or not

trying to cultivate the development of commitments to children and social change like those expressed by the informants in this study would be a gross mistake.

In a study of experienced urban teachers, Nieto (2003) describes patterns of response from highly successful teachers that parallel many of the patterns described above. When asked what keeps urban teachers going, Nieto's participants described the motivation associated with feelings of anger and desperation when they contemplated the injustices endured by their students. Nieto points out that for her experienced participants, "A commitment to social justice—the ideals of democracy, fair play, and equality—figures prominently among the reasons why these teachers chose the profession" (p. 260). These experienced urban teachers also identified their ability to change lives and shape the future as a key factor in their willingness to stay in urban teaching. So long as they do not come to urban teaching with a "missionary zeal to convert the heathen masses," new (and experienced) teachers' feelings of social responsibility, willingness to take on a challenge, and desire to make a difference for children and society should be valued and nurtured.

### **Implications**

Anyone interested in urban teaching and teacher education may find these initial findings useful as they select, plan for, and support those preparing to work in urban schools. Having a solid understanding of the backgrounds, understandings, and beliefs of those who expressly want to teach in urban schools can be invaluable to those responsible for preparing, hiring, and mentoring new urban teachers.

The results of this analysis contribute to an emerging picture of where these particular students are in their teaching careers and provide a substantial baseline on which to gauge (and guide) their future development. The findings point to places on which to continue to build knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in urban classrooms. Because this study intends to be transformative, the activities involved in participating in the study (interviews and reflective journals) have provided avenues beyond the course curriculum through which the students can critically examine their beliefs, impressions, and actions. As research data are generated over the next two years, opportunities for critical examination will continue and changes in their perspectives on urban teaching will be charted.

As this cohort moves into the internship phase of their preparation, findings from this analysis indicate a need to focus future experiences in three areas. Other teacher educators may find similar experiences to be beneficial for their prospective urban teachers:

- Students should be given opportunities to explore their own reasons for wanting to teach in urban settings and to think carefully about what those reasons mean for those who live and work in those contexts.
- Students should have enriched experiences interacting with urban teachers, children, families, and community members.
- Students should be given support to develop tools for designing, monitoring, and controlling their own socialization as urban teachers.

Attracting, preparing, and keeping competent and committed professionals has never been more important to urban schools and communities. It is encouraging to examine the reasons for

selecting urban teaching revealed in this study. Knowing their motives can be a useful tool for assessing future urban teachers' multicultural development and guiding their future experiences. Ignoring or assuming that we know their values and aspirations is shortsighted and could contribute to the difficulties of keeping talented teachers in urban schools.

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