

# **Exploring Issues of Support and Leadership in the Experiences of Prospective Teachers of Color: Retaining Minority Students and Producing Change Agents for Urban Schools**

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## **Abstract**

*One of the greatest challenges for the United States as a nation, and for Paterson, NJ in particular, is how to attract and retain academically and pedagogically talented teachers for urban schools - teachers who are committed to remain in those schools to do the difficult, long-term work of reform and renewal. This work is critical if urban students are to succeed in post-secondary education and in the world of work. In response to this increasing need, this paper will explore (1) how one university is actively recruiting and preparing urban teacher candidates through the Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow Program (PT4T) and (2) urban teacher candidate perspectives on their preparation experience as it relates to school leadership. Data analysis revealed several themes regarding their perceptions of support, leadership, and school change.*

## **Introduction**

The recruitment and retention of teachers for urban schools is an issue in the forefront of educational policy today. Alarmists have warned of mass teacher shortages, and this is true for certain geographic areas and subject specialties. The fact is that in many wealthy, high-paying school districts, there is actually a glut of teacher applications. Shortages exist in poor areas, mostly urban, where teachers are placed in classrooms for which they are unprepared and teacher turnover is extremely high. For example, Christenson and Levine (1998) reported that fourteen percent of teachers in schools with a student population whose majority were students of color were teaching with emergency certificates.

A serious situation has developed in the United States, as can be seen in urban communities like Paterson, NJ, where students who need the best prepared, most experienced, and most committed teachers are being taught by the least prepared teachers, many of whom are teaching out of certification area. The result of this is a substandard education for poor students, especially students of color; it is one that has serious ramifications for their post-secondary education and employment prospects.

One of the greatest challenges for the United States as a nation, and for Paterson in particular, is how to attract and retain academically and pedagogically talented teachers for urban schools - teachers who are committed to remain in those schools to do the difficult, long-term work of reform and renewal. This work is critical if urban students are to succeed in post-secondary education and in the world of work. In response to this increasing need, this paper will explore

(1) how William Paterson University is actively recruiting and preparing urban teacher candidates through the Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow Program (PT4T)<sup>2</sup> and (2) urban teacher candidate perspectives on their preparation experience as it relates school leadership. There were two guiding research questions: From the perspective of teacher candidates for urban schools, what programs can the university institute to support teacher candidates of color and teachers for urban public schools? What does effective school leadership and school change look like for urban public schools? Data was collected via interviews and analyzed for reoccurring similarities and differences. Data analysis revealed several themes regarding their perceptions of support, leadership, and school change.

## **Literature Review**

It is not easy to discuss the selection process for teachers in urban schools. Questions about who can teach in urban schools raise topics such as what constitutes teacher competence, the ethnic match between teachers and students, and the appropriate dispositions to teach all children. Historically, teacher education programs have admitted, and states have certified, almost any teacher candidate who can manage to pass through an approved teacher education program. But increasingly, educators have begun to provide evidence about the types of teachers who are most likely to stay in poor, urban districts (Garcia, 2002; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This special group is characterized by, among other things, their strong content knowledge base, their ability to construct and teach lessons in multiple ways, and their commitment to students, parents, and the community whom they serve (Hill & Gillette, 2005).

### ***Community Teachers***

The literature indicates that there is a significant need for colleges and universities to actively recruit and rigorously train urban teacher candidates for highly demanding urban teaching careers. Murrell (2000) sets forth that universities need to develop community teacher programs to meet the needs of diverse urban school districts. Community teachers are invested in the uplift of the community in which they teach and live. Often, community teachers are graduates from the same or similar schools districts in which they teach. Consequently, these teacher candidates are invested in the community and in the process of educating urban students because they can identify with many of the experiences of their students. Additionally, they have a vested interest in making the school system work better. Moreover, as teacher insiders (Hill & Gillette, 2005) they understand both the student and teacher perspectives on many issues because they can reflect on their own past and current experiences within the urban environment.

According to School & Sandoval (2000), urban school districts experience higher rates of teacher shortages in math, science, special education and other areas. Consequently, these shortages can negatively impact service delivery for urban school districts due to an increase in class size in these critical areas which may decrease the amount of individualized attention each student will receive. This could also decrease student performance overtime.

In the opinion of Cooper (2000), African American male students suffer the most due to improperly trained teachers. Therefore, teacher training programs need to prepare teachers more vigorously in various learning styles and cross-cultural awareness. According to Murrell (2000), universities need to develop community teacher programs to meet the needs of diverse urban

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Hill & Gillette 2005 for a full description of the Paterson Teachers For Tomorrow Program.

school districts. The PT4T program was developed to address the urban teacher shortage and urban teacher retention issues. PT4T scholars were raised in Paterson and attended Paterson public schools. We also see this special group as teacher insiders of their community. As insiders they hold a vision particular to lived experience. They know from first hand experience what students and schools in Paterson, NJ, need to be successful (Hill & Gillette, 2005).

### ***Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow***

Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow is a collaborative project that began during the 1999-2000 school year, with the establishment of Future Teacher of America (FTA) clubs in the three largest high schools. Each club is lead by at least one faculty advisor selected by the school principal, and one WPUNJ faculty liaison. If the FTA club members participate in club activities, perform community service, and promise to return to Paterson in order to teach, they are eligible to apply for and receive a four-year scholarship to complete their college degree with teaching certification, pending admittance to the university. There are currently thirty PT4T scholars at WPUNJ working toward a bachelor's degree with teaching certification.

The PT4T project is rooted in social reconstructionist theory. This theory posits that the purpose of schools is to develop individuals who are skillful, knowledgeable critical thinkers who will use their talents to reconstruct society to be more equitable and just (Brameld; 1956, Freire, 1996; Grant & Sleeter, 1998). In addition to social reconstructionist theory, we also utilize theoretical perspectives that emanate from non-traditional epistemologies, particularly the notions of race uplift (Washington, 1901; Collins, 1991), other mothering (Collins, 1991), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; McLaren, 2003). These are key, interrelated concepts that support the perspectives of PT4T staff as well as help us understand and analyze the experiences of students of color and provide guidance and support. In short, these perspectives forefront issues of race, class, gender and power.

A basic assumption in the design of PT4T is that those who understand a system by virtue of having lived in the system and learned to deconstruct that system (insiders) are in the best position to utilize their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve that system. Students, having been empowered themselves, will empower others.

### ***Producing Change Agents and Effective Leaders***

Often, the changing political climate of the urban educational system can hinder teacher performance. Consequently, prospective teachers need to be empowered with the tools to become resilient change agents and school leaders. As teacher insiders, PT4T students are already motivated to change urban schools in some manner. According to the literature, change agents must be leaders who possess ethics, vision and a belief in the abilities of others. In the opinion of Evans (2001), change agents should be authentic leaders who promote the growth and development of the staff members. These leaders are not competing for recognition, however, they recognize an institutional need and are inspired to facilitate change. Additionally, leaders must provide credence to the communal growth and development of the organization. Being an ethical innovator is important because it allows all staff members know that personal and corporate integrity are an integral part of the change process. This raises the standards by which all should operate and creates an atmosphere of respect. Consequently, although staff members

may not initially agree with the proposed changes their respect for the change agent may open the door for them to reconsider the efficacy of the new program.

The vision of the leader helps to maintain the focus of the change process and inspires others to be committed to the development and implementation of new programs. Often, the change process is difficult for a variety of reasons, therefore, the vision of the leader will also help weary staff members to see the overall purpose of the innovations. Evans (2001) suggests that leaders should not have a narrow vision that is not inclusive of the perspectives of others. The vision of an authentic leader has respect for the input of others and the latitude to include the input to create a new comprehensive collective vision for the organization.

Additionally, a leader that believes in the abilities of others will empower staff members to help create the new program and the implementation process. This empowerment of staff will help to reduce resistance to change because they will be apart of the change process from the beginning. This is validates the input of staff members and enables them to feel included in the decision making process which is important for the implementation process.

Patterson, Patterson & Collins (2002) identified seven strengths that increase resiliency in school leaders: 1) remaining positive in spite of adversity, 2) focusing on what really matters, 3) being flexible in how you achieve your goals, 4) taking charge of what you can do, 5) creating a climate of personal and professional support, 6) setting high standards of student, teacher and parental success, and 7) share responsibility and encourage the participation of others. According to this research, these are important characteristics that resilient school professionals possess to reduce burn out. Similarly, these are required qualities described for those who are change agents.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of minority urban teacher candidates regarding their teacher preparation experiences and ideas on school leadership and school change. There were two guiding research questions: From the perspective of teacher candidates for urban schools, what programs can the university institute to support teacher candidates of color and teachers for urban public schools? What does effective school leadership and school change look like for urban public schools? Study results enable university administrators and teacher educators to identify strengths and weaknesses within the urban teacher preparation process. For example, teacher preparation program curriculum committees may want to continually ask, in what ways are the notions of leadership and school change embedded in our program curricula?

## ***Sample Information***

A snowball sampling approach was used to identify participants for this research. All participants are scholars in the PT4T program at William Paterson University. For this study, n = five. This consisted of three male and two female students. Four participants were African American and one participant was Latina. Two students were in the junior year of study and three students were university sophomores.

### ***Data Collection***

Data was collected via focus group interviews. An interview guide was developed based upon the results of a pilot study. This interview guide consisted of 11 open-ended questions designed to explore participant perspectives on the teacher preparation program at WPUNJ, urban school change and school leadership. Please see Appendix A for interview questions.

A semi-structured interview was conducted for three focus groups in the Spring 2005 semester. The focus group interviews were conducted in the WPUNJ Library. Each interview was tape recorded and lasted approximately one and one-half hours. Interviews were lively in nature and at times resembled a conversation between friends.

Tape recording the interviews increased the accuracy of data collection and allowed researchers to be more attentive to the participants. Throughout the interview, brief field notes were taken to assist with keeping track of information received and formulating new questions. These field notes also served as a guide by outlining the data for initial transcription.

### ***Data Analysis & Results***

Focus group interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. We did not experience or anticipate a clear moment when data collection ended and data analysis began. Rather, analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. The analytic strategy most relevant to this study was the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and emphasized by Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Transcribed interviews and selected documents were analyzed for emergent themes that revealed similarities and differences related to support, leadership, and school change. Rooted in the analysis and conclusion is "a search for goodness" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of the available programs at the University and success stories of students.

Pilot data analysis revealed 6 recurring themes reported by pilot study participants: (1) they were apprehensive about the college experience as first year students and the freshman seminar was not helpful in the transition, (2) they had difficulty with time management (i.e. balancing work, school and personal life), (3) the University should expand its current student support system (4) the University should develop better ways to enhance student awareness about basic services, (5) faculty should utilize a student centered instruction style, and (6) they felt isolated in classes because they were the only African American student in class.

Two important themes have emerged from preliminary study findings as it relates to "teacher insiders" and "university experiences". The first considers the notion that fostering interest in careers in teaching among high school students regardless of academic performance or personal issues makes a difference in the decision to teach. The second theme considers that self-esteem as a person of color and the ability to focus on school despite overwhelming personal issues are the single most important factors in students' success.

In answering research question #1, university support, participants' support systems included relationships with mentors, self, and the notion of education as freedom. Participants felt that the university provides effective support services.

In answering research question #2, school leadership and school change, data indicate that participant perspectives on effective leadership include having a philosophy of respect and efficacy.

### **Support Systems**

The first set of themes is related to the development of support systems for students of color and teacher candidates for urban schools. Students support systems included “relationships with mentors”, “self”, and the empowering notion of “Education as Freedom”. That is, students wanted to develop relationships with faculty members of color. They reported that they often had to rely only on themselves for support. Also, they viewed education as freedom from oppression.

One student says:

I need enforcement. Not necessarily from professors, mainly from myself. I need to enforce not getting my work done, but taking my time and making sure it is perfect.

Another student says:

I think that if the university, instead of handing out pamphlets about how to go about graduating, or what to complete in your major, I think if it was more about one on one experience not just with the advisors. Sort of like a place where students can go anytime.

These quotes indicate that the students feel personally responsible for their own success. Also, they look for relevant feedback from others to guide them through their educational experience.

Participants agreed that the university provided good support services to students related to tutoring, advisement and financial support. Students also indicated that they need to take more advantage of the university services. One participant noted, however that service hours should be more flexible in order to serve non-traditional students. For example, one student said:

They have a lot of stuff on campus to help you to really support you like the academic support center, the writing center. There are a lot of ways to get that help. I just think that a lot of people on campus don't take advantage of it. I didn't take advantage of it until I really needed it. I never come at the beginning of the semester when no grades are in, I wait to the last minute to come and get some help. There is a lot on campus now but there always could be more stuff.

According to Cradle and Dean (1991), higher educational institutions must proactively identify and address the needs and concerns of students of color. Historically, institutions have interacted with minority student populations in a reactive manner by creating interventions or programs as issues and difficult situations on-campus. In the opinion of Cradle and Dean (1991), higher education institutions should complete the following steps to enhance the retention of minority students: (a) the examine their philosophies and missions; (b) assess its ability to work with minority students; (c) determine minority students' academic and social readiness; (d) schedule early visits to the institution; (e) establish a good rapport with minority students; (f) help minority students learn to navigate the organizational structure of the institution; (g) develop a mentoring program for students; (h) assist in career exploration; and, (i) assist students of color in preparing for the work world.

Participants also saw their college education as an act of freedom. For example, one student noted her ability to think differently when on campus and noticed that when she is home, she is reminded of the “narrow and un-educated” thinking that some of her friends and family members have. Thus, this Latina wants to return to Paterson to teach critical thinking.

Education is like intertwining with other people. And then you go back where you came from to teach others. I don't want to grow up and have a family and be just like my mom or my cousins. They are narrow-minded and seem so closed in. Almost like they can't see any further, they don't see the future.

Another participant agrees and adds, “The people who learned basic education, they don't know anything else, and then they have children and teach their children the basics. It is a cycle.”

One other participant has an urgency for the Paterson community to take a hard look at themselves and life circumstance. She notes:

We have to put everybody together at some point so that we can all take a good look at each other and really evaluate ourselves and say to ourselves – is this what we really want in life?

### **Perspectives on School Leadership and School Change**

A theme related to changing the system provided a wealth of information about student perspectives on school leadership. Particularly, the participants provided their concept of school change, school leadership and the differences between suburban schools and urban schools.

One student remarked:

School change...The school can only change through the students first because students have to realize that school is fun only if you make it fun.

Another student said:

So teachers come to work and some teachers are like, ‘I'm just here because of the money’...we have to get rid of that and have them realize that they're here because of the students.

Another said:

Oh, yes. I want to be like... First of all, I'm going make sure that my class is interesting 'cause if its not - you've lost your students in the first five minutes. And I only had two teachers who were interesting and made you not want to leave the class and its time for you to leave the class and you're so interested that you don't want to leave. They were probably not even teaching you they're just talking to the class about something and you don't want to leave. If teachers were like that, I think schools would be better. If you make school interesting and lesson plans interesting then your students will be interested in what you're saying.

These quotes indicate that the participants perceive the initiation of school coming from the students who attend the school. The participants have identified the student as an active participant in school change which is a grass roots perspective on change. Additionally, the participants have indicated that the teachers who are not teaching to support student development need to be identified and encouraged to change or be removed. These are strong sediments

presented by the participants who expressed concern about the number of urban teachers that did not really care about the students.

Students also gave their perceptions on school leadership. Themes like respect and proper student preparation emerged. One student said:

Every principal is a school leader and students may not like the principal but, every student evaluates their principal. My freshman year in high school, I hated my principal. He never talked to us, never explained anything to us. He had one meeting to say that if I catch you in the hallway you are suspended. He just came off too negative. And then we had Mr. Jakes, and it was like here is a positive guy that interacts with students and comes to our games, motivates us, comes to our classes and makes sure that we are doing are work.

Another participant said:

School leadership is preparing students in urban school for college. A lot of us are not prepared and we are taught that going to community college is good. School leaders should help and enforce and stress how important it is to pursue your education beyond the basics and make sure students take the SAT.

One other participant said:

From my experience what I think school leadership should be is preparing student in urban schools to go to college. A lot of us are not prepared for college or university. We are taught to go to community college and that it is as good as a university. So school leadership should tell how important it is to pursue your education, and leadership should stress not just the basis but education beyond the basics. In high school it's all about the basic skills test. They say pass that and they tell you oh your good, you can go to college but, they don't prepare you for when you get here. They don't tell you that you have to take your SAT, or to keep your gpa up, or not to be a procrastinator. All they do now is help you through that basic skills test.

These quotes on school leadership indicate that the participants expect to experience a personal connection with their principal. Moreover, they expect their principal to be a source of inspiration and motivation beyond the normal daily functions of the school. Additionally, the participants expanded the definition of school leadership past the position of principal but as universal concept regarding the school systems' overall preparation of students for college.

Participants also view a leader as one who will make sure urban students are as prepared for college as their suburban counterparts. For example, one student talked about basic skills vs. critical skills.

Then you come to college after the basic skills test. Of course Ridgewood and other white communities will have higher test scores because their students take classes further than basic skills. They are not just learning math, they are learning math applied to this and math applied to that. At the schools we went to, you just learn enough to get by.



This quote mirrored similar participant perspectives on their preparation experience in high school for college. There is a reported perception of not being rigorously prepared for college like those who live in suburban and predominately white communities. This quote reveals that participants believed that urban schools do not academically challenge students in the same manner as suburban students. Furthermore, it indicates a standard of reaching mediocrity (basic skills) for urban students.

### **Educational Importance and Implications**

This paper explored the perspectives of PT4T scholars, also urban teacher candidates - on their preparation experience as it relates support, school change and school leadership. The results reveal broad and diverse implications for pedagogy, social development, and university policy.

Data indicate that in order to fully prepare teacher urban teacher candidates to work in urban school settings, we must equip them with the tools necessary to critically analyze the schools in which they teach. This will require urban teacher candidates to read specific literature about school leadership and school change. This information will empower them to become effective change agents in any school system.

Results from this study also indicate other major curriculum ideas for teacher education. Infusing information on the dispositions of an effective school leader and the notions of respect and efficacy may help to effectively prepare teachers for urban classrooms. These ideas support several of Patterson, Patterson & Collins' (2002) strengths that increase resiliency in school leaders.

Results also indicate that future urban teachers see school students as active participants in school change. This grass roots perspective builds on the notion of emergent leadership that comes from school participants and that is empowering.

Additionally, urban teacher preparation programs need to require teacher candidates to discuss and analyze school change models. This will build their skills in critical thinking, problem solving and organizational development. The expansion of this knowledge based will help increase the ability of urban teachers to negotiate their teaching experience as difficulties arise.

Results indicate that higher education institutions need to develop services that respond to the academic and social needs of students, which meet the unique characteristics of their students and institution (Sherman, Giles, Williams-Green, 1999). This will require the internal development of assessment tools and research methods specific to the institution. Moreover, this requires institutions to allocate time and funding to complete the assessment and program development processes.

These results indicate that there needs to be an evaluation of how services are delivered to minority students from the admissions process to graduation. Consequently, the university must identify and remedy these gaps in service delivery to increase the retention rates of minority students.

Results of this study also enable higher education institutions to find new ways of developing pipelines of effective leaders for urban schools. Universities must develop aggressive urban student teacher recruitment programs to meet the needs of the nation's urban schools. This will help decrease the urban class room size and give students the attention that they need to excel.

If we are to truly affect change in urban schools, we must find ways to recruit teachers who have firm identities and teacher selves (Hill, 2003), who are not afraid to "rock the boat" (Gillette, 2003), and who desire to obtain educational success, or freedom, for themselves and for their community. This study advances our knowledge of teacher candidates for urban schools, teacher retention, and teacher recruitment.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your interactions with faculty in the classroom?
2. Beyond student teaching, what can prospective school districts provide to help you successfully complete your academic program?
3. How can WPU's current support services be improved for students?
4. How do you motivate yourself to perform well in courses that seem irrelevant to real life?
5. From an Urban teacher candidate perspective, what support systems do you need to be successful in completing your academic program in higher education?
6. In K-12 schools, what is your idea of school leadership? Provide an example.
7. What is your idea of school change?
8. In K-12 schools, give an example of school change.
9. Is school change important? Why or Why not?
10. From the urban teacher perspective what support systems do you need to be successful as a change agent for community uplift?
11. As a teacher, do you believe that you will be able to facilitate school change?
12. In your elementary and high school experience, who in administration did you perceive to be a positive example of a change agent? Why?