

Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Urban Contexts

J. Amos Hatch

University of Tennessee

This article reports findings from a qualitative study of preservice teachers' beliefs about the contexts of urban teaching. Participants were in their first semester of a K-6 licensure program designed to prepare them for urban teaching. Interviews and email reflective journal exchanges with the researcher were the data of the study, and descriptive-analytic findings are organized using a taxonomy of preservice teacher beliefs about urban children, schools, families, and communities. Interpretive generalizations are presented as consistencies and paradoxes across preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching in urban settings.

This article reports findings from the first stages of a longitudinal qualitative study of the perspectives of new professionals as they enter a teacher education program designed specifically to prepare them to teach in urban elementary schools. Future stages of the study will document their progress through their program (including a year's internship), and initial teaching in urban schools. The research question of this initial study is: "What are these preservice teachers' beliefs about urban contexts at this point in their development?" In addition to providing a baseline for ongoing longitudinal research, these analyses offer important insights into how new professionals who select urban teaching as a career think about the children, families, schools, and communities with which they plan to work.

The literature on new teacher socialization (Cochran-Smith, & Fries, 2005; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon,

1998) emphasizes the important effects that preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes have on what they learn in teacher preparation programs and take with them into their teaching. The beliefs and attitudes of candidates preparing to teach in urban settings are especially important influences on how they process information and experiences in their teacher preparation programs. When the majority of teaching candidates preparing to work in diverse urban settings is made up of White, middle class, women (as is the case in this study), the potential for discontinuities between the candidates beliefs and the perspectives of those they are preparing to teach increases (Gay, 1993; Irvine, 1997).

Background

The preservice teachers in this study were all part of the Urban-Multicultural Teacher Education (UMTE) program at the University of Tennessee. Like all K-6 licensure programs at the university, UMTE is based on a five-year model that includes a full-year's internship completed at the master's degree level. Prospective undergraduate students must meet progression requirements, then interview for slots in the program. Students must complete a bachelor's degree with an arts and sciences major and an education minor before the internship can begin.

The UMTE program organizes newly admitted students into cohort groups, and these groups experience the majority of their education minor as an integrated experience during the last semester ("spring block") of their senior year. Students then complete their internship and associated graduate coursework with the same cohort in urban elementary schools that have relationships with UMTE.

The program's expressed purpose is to select and prepare individuals who will be successful teachers in urban elementary schools and who will elect to stay in them. Students' day-to-day program experience involve exposure

to a complex mixture of meaningful activities that integrate applied pedagogical knowledge, in-class experiences, and reflective practice. Theoretical foundations woven throughout the program include elements related to multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, urban education, and critical pedagogy (Anyon, 2005; Banks, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Giroux, 1988; Irvine, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Method

The overall study is grounded in critical/feminist ontology and epistemology (Hatch, 2002). 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 in ways that can lead to positive change that transforms participants' lives and improves their abilities to contribute to communities in which they teach.

Participants

The participants in this study are 12 members of the cohort that completed its spring block in 2006. All students in the cohort were invited to participate, and all but two volunteered. The participant group was made up of 11 women and one man; nine were European-American and three were African-American students; and their ages ranged from 21 to 44 years. Estimates of socio-economic status were self-reported by the participants to range from lower through middle class (see Table 1). Participants volunteered to be part of a longitudinal study that will track their development as educators through their internship and into their first years as urban teachers.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study included open-ended interviews and

TABLE 1 *Study Participants*

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

Note: *All names are pseudonyms; F=female; M=male; EA = Euro-American; AA = African American; P = Poverty Class; W = Working Class; L-M = Lower-Middle Class; M = Middle Class

participant-researcher interactive journal writing via email. Twelve participants were interviewed for approximately one hour each in the spring following their admission into the UMTE 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 schools at this early stage of their preparation. Participants and the researcher also exchanged weekly interactive electronic journal entries around the same focus in the spring block.

Data Analysis

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 participants' perspectives. It provides a rigorous method for generating data-based findings, while acknowledging the researcher's political positioning. Interview and electronic journal data were initially parsed by typologies related to beliefs about urban children, schools, families, and communities. 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 solidly grounded in the data.

Findings

Findings are organized based on the taxonomy generated from the data analysis described above (see Table 2 below). The taxonomy summarizes generalizations that were the outcome of an analysis the participants' expressed beliefs about urban contexts. The findings are reported as analytic generalizations from the taxonomy, and excerpts from participants' written comments in their reflective journals (labeled with a letter "R") and responses recorded in open-ended interview transcripts (identified using the letter "I") are presented as data displays to support each generalization. The intent is to use the participants' own words to bring to life the meanings behind the analytic generalizations.

Beliefs about Urban Children

Analysis revealed four beliefs about urban children that held up across the data. The most commonly held belief was that urban children grow up faster, are more independent and more street smart. Maturity, independence, and street savvy were viewed as resilient responses to what were perceived to be the challenging conditions of urban life.

They have just a sense of—just this aura that they can do stuff on their own. I think they are

TABLE 2 *Taxonomy of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Urban Contexts*

About urban children, these novice teachers believe:

- Children grow up faster, are more independent and more street smart
- Many children have low expectations for success
- Many children start out behind and stay behind academically
- Many children are eager to learn

About urban schools, these novice teachers believe:

- Expectations for children to succeed are low
- Schools are safe, nurturing places for children
- Lack of discipline is a major issue
- Many teachers don't want to be there
- Facilities and resources are substandard

About urban families, these novice teachers believe:

- Many are not involved in their children's education
 - a. They feel intimidated by school personnel
 - b. Many are overwhelmed by their circumstances
 - c. Many don't see the value of education
 - d. Many don't care
- Many family situations are not stable
- Many are not providing appropriate parenting for their children

About urban communities, these novice teachers believe

- Poverty is a pervasive fact of life
 - Crime, violence, and drugs are widespread
-

very self-sufficient, and they are strong at a young age. Like they know that they can go to the store, they walk to school, and some of them wash their own clothes when they are only in like second grade. Reina (I)

Participants also believed that many urban children have low expectations for success. As will be discussed under interpretations, low expectations were systemic problems that preservice teachers believed permeated urban schools and communities. Urban children were assumed to have internalized the pervasively low expectations of them.

Teachers experience resistance when students do not believe that there is a world outside of the life they are currently living, and the students experience resistance when people (whether it is society, parents, educational system) continue to discourage them. They would rather not imagine that things can change than get hurt by hoping that they can. Venessa, (R)

Future teachers in this study believed that many urban children start out behind and stay behind academically. They reasoned that urban students start school behind their middle-class counterparts because of different home and school experiences. Once in school, urban students continue to struggle because the gaps in their early experiences continue to make their academic progress more difficult.

Students in an urban school may not have had the opportunities that suburban students have had to prepare them for school. So the number of children who may be on the lower end of the spectrum of achievement is more likely to be higher in the urban schools. Johnetta, (R)

In spite of perceived low expectations and slow progress, participants also believed many urban children are eager to learn. Preservice teachers completed field rotations in three urban and one suburban elementary school; it was natural for them to make comparisons of these experiences.

I would say that I have seen much more eagerness to learn in the urban kids. It depends on the age group, but they can look at it as an opportunity to better themselves and their lifestyle, whereas the suburban child may feel like it is just something they have to do. Janet (I).

Beliefs about Urban Schools

The most widely held belief about urban schools was that in them, expectations for children to succeed are low. Participants asserted that they did not share these same low expectations, but their perception was that this kind of thinking was characteristic of urban schools.

Some people think that since students are in an urban school that their expectations for actually succeeding are very low. I think that is a load of crap, but that's what people think. Annette, (I)

Participants also believed that urban schools are safe, nurturing places for children. They valued teachers' efforts to provide an environment that participants believed to be a kind of haven from the lack of safety and care that children experienced in their lives away from school.

The urban students wanted or at least seemed to want to be there. I felt as though many of them saw school as a safe place where they knew that people cared for them, and they were safe. I feel as though the students wanted and needed that extra bit of attention from the teacher and loved it when it could be given. Johnetta, (R).

At the same time they saw schools as safe havens, these preservice teachers believed that a lack of discipline is a major issue for urban schools. They saw the disruptions caused by student misbehavior as major impediments to

student learning and teacher success. They acknowledged that lack of discipline is one of their biggest concerns.

Urban schools have a lot more discipline problems to deal with than suburban schools do. Discipline problems account for most of the gaps in[urban students'] education. Becky, (R)

Another belief was that many teachers do not want to be in urban schools. Although it is hard to say if the participants' views were based on experience or their knowledge of the transience of urban teachers, data analysis confirmed a shared belief that many teachers take jobs in urban schools because those are the only teaching slots available. Participants believed that these teachers are unhappy in urban settings and apply to transfer to other schools as soon as they are able.

It is very difficult to get teachers for these schools because of all the problems. Teachers move in and out of the schools... Most teachers are new teachers because it is such an easy job to obtain, although most do not stay in this environment. Judy (R).

Lastly, participants believed that facilities and resources are substandard. They saw the inequities between materials, supplies, buildings, and furnishings in urban and suburban schools to be inherently unfair.

The schools I am familiar with don't have the resources that suburban schools do. When there are not enough books to go around, there is not enough copying paper, they expect teachers to work with what they have. Ernest, (R).

Beliefs about Urban Families

The most salient theme that emerged from an analysis of these preservice teachers' beliefs about urban families was that urban parents are not involved in their children's education. A closer look at the data related to this generalization revealed four explanations for parents' lack of involvement. Participants believed that families do not engage with schools because they (a) feel intimidated by school personnel, (b) are overwhelmed by their circumstances, (c) do not see the value of education, and/or (d) don't care. The excerpts below offer examples of how this study's future teachers talked about the explanations.

I can see that how schools have so much of an authoritarian approach that the parents might be intimidated by such a restrictive environment that they can't really relate to. Elsie, (I)

In a lot of urban schools, the parents are probably not home when the child gets there and would not even have the time to sit down with them. Judy, (I)

Some parents do not understand the importance of education as the foundation of a child's future. It is very difficult to teach a child who does not want to be taught and in many homes the importance of education is not being emphasized. Mackenzie, (R)

Study participants also believed that many family situations are not stable in urban contexts. This instability was seen as a negative impact on urban children. Elements of instability mentioned by the preservice teachers included teen parenting, drug use and addiction, frequent moves, lack of stable male role models, and parenting by siblings and extended family members. In the excerpt below, one of the participants reflects on her own childhood, as she talks about experiences of children in unstable, urban families.

Some of them have extenuating circumstances that they can do nothing about. Like..having to come home to a mother that is on crack, not knowing when you are going to get fed, or having to live in a roach-infested apartment with two sisters and a brother that you can't really do nothing for because you're only eleven. Annette, (I).

Participants also believed that many urban adults are not providing appropriate parenting for their children.

In urban settings, children may not have been taught that when you use the bathroom to wash your hands when you're done and to brush your hair when you get up in the morning, and you don't wear dirty clothes to school. Cheryl Ann, (I)

Beliefs about Urban Communities

Analyses of preservice teachers' beliefs about urban communities produced two related generalizations. The first was that poverty is a pervasive fact of life. As a group, these future urban teachers connected urban communities with the conditions and consequences of poverty. They saw links between student, family, and community poverty and children's and teachers' experience of urban schooling.

If families are living in poverty, it makes it difficult for teachers because there may be a high mobility rate among the students. Poverty levels also affect the health of students. If parents do not have the money to feed their children healthy foods or if they do not receive regular medical attention, then more students will be absent from school. Julie, (R)

The second generalization about urban communities was that participants believed crime, violence, and drugs are widespread. In interviews and journal entries, they appeared

to assume that urban communities are unsafe places characterized by drug use and violent, criminal activity.

Areas that harbor and breed people who live by a different ethical code than the teachers surround urban schools. I'm not saying that all urban schools are in bad neighborhoods, but realistically, I can guarantee that there are more unemployed, welfare, and criminal citizens living in urban areas than in the suburbs. Ernest, (R)

Interpretations

The findings above are presented as descriptions of a small set of preservice teachers' beliefs about urban contexts. Borrowing from Wolcott's (1994) notion that every qualitative study has (in different proportions) elements of description, analysis and interpretation, the discussion that follows presents interpretations that bring another layer of understanding to the data analysis. Interpretations are divided into "consistencies" and "paradoxes" discovered in the data. As these interpretations are discussed, connections to salient research and theory are made.

Consistencies

Expectations are low across the board. The preservice teachers in this study believed that children in urban environments, their teachers and schools, and their parents and communities had generally low expectations for student success. Although some studies (Watson, Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, & Gordon, 2006; Tiezzi & Cross, 1997) indicate negative perceptions among preservice teachers about urban children's chances to succeed, these study participants seemed resist taking on the low expectations of others. However, their perception was that urban students had internalized these low expectations.

Poverty is a powerful force. Participants indicated a strong belief that poverty was the core negative influence in urban contexts. As these future educators sought to rationalize the difficulties of urban teaching, the poverty that they believe characterizes urban settings was their primary explanation. From substandard facilities to low parent involvement, participants cited the effects of poverty as the root cause. Their view mirrors much of the literature on issues in urban settings (Goode & Maskovsky, 2002) and may reflect their desire to avoid confronting issues such as institutional racism and other forms of oppression.

Urban schools, communities, and families are deficient. Like other preservice teachers in the literature (Hollins & Guzman, 2005), the individuals in this study adopted a deficit model as they conceptualized urban schools, communities, and families. They appeared to apply the norms and expectations of White, middle-class America to making judgments about the quality of urban schools, the suitability of urban communities, and the appropriateness of urban parenting (Rist, 2000). Even those participants whose backgrounds were not “mainstream” seemed to adopt this deficit approach to understanding urban contexts.

Paradoxes

Children are eager to learn but perpetually behind academically. Like their counterparts in other teacher education programs (Hollins & Guzman, 2005), these preservice teachers believed that urban children start with significant academic disadvantages that follow students throughout their schooling. At the same time, many study participants believed that the urban children with whom they were working were happy and successful learners. This apparent inconsistency may be partially explained by the participants’ overriding belief in the pervasive power of poverty to limit the overall life chances of urban children.

Urban schools are safe havens for children, but these schools are characterized by violence and discipline problems. Whenever educators and/or the general public are polled, a consistent finding is that people believe that schools across the board are failing, but the schools close to them are doing fine (Rose & Gallup, 2006). A similar phenomenon may be at work here. The press, popular media, and the general public promulgate the notion that urban schools are dangerous places full of unruly young people. The participants in this study and other prospective teachers (Gilbert, 1997) have adopted that image. At the same time, these preservice see the schools in which they have done field experiences as calm and orderly safety zones for kids.

The perceived positives associated with urban settings are based on overcoming deficits. Participants had many opportunities to identify strengths in urban students, schools, families, and communities, and some of the participants did so. But the overwhelming pattern was that the strengths found in urban contexts were connected with somehow overcoming deficiencies (Howard, 2003). It is very troubling that even the most positive perceptions of these future urban teachers were based on the assumed negativity of living and going to school in urban settings.

Discussion

It is important to remember that, at the time of the study, these 12 students were just beginning their teacher preparation. These analyses reflect where they were at one point in time, and there is no intent to say they should have been somewhere else. Even though influences of individual life histories are largely lost in an analysis of this type, it is important to note that this group is like other prospective urban teachers in many ways. In their comprehensive review of the literature on preparing teachers for diverse populations, Hollins and Guzman (2005, p. 511) summarize:

Many of these candidates seem to enter teacher preparation programs with negative or deficit attitudes and beliefs about those different from themselves. Interestingly... they often express a willingness to teach in urban areas despite limited experiences and conflicting attitudes and beliefs.

Because it is the job of teacher educators to support the development of future urban teachers, understanding what preservice teachers bring to their teacher preparation is an important starting place for overcoming their limited experiences and addressing their conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Processes that parallel the data collection strategies of this project can be useful tools for urban teacher educators, enabling instructors to gather insights into their students' beliefs and attitudes at the same time they are providing the future teachers with vehicles for expressing their ideas and reflecting on them. Interviews need not be formal, tape-recorded events, but asking questions about beliefs heightens preservice teachers' awareness of the importance of their attitudes and dispositions toward urban schooling. Interactive exchanges via email (or otherwise) can be a powerful mechanism for encouraging reflection around important issues, including the impact of applying a deficit model to understanding urban contexts.

In the UMTE program, we access the beliefs of our students via these methods and others, including weekly seminar debriefings during the internship year. We address these novice urban teachers' beliefs via continuous, interactive face-to-face and electronic communication, as well as through activities such as community mapping projects; interviews with community and school leaders, parents, and students; critical literacy activities; readings and discussions of relevant literature; and role-playing activities designed to help them confront their own prejudices and those of the society that surrounds them. I agree with Hollins and Guzman's conclusion that "unless prospective teachers

have opportunities to rethink and change their attitudes and beliefs, the students who are in the greatest academic need may also be the ones least likely to have access to rich learning opportunities” (2005, p. 482). Whatever their approach, it is imperative that teacher educators find ways to access and address the beliefs of students they are preparing to be the next generation of urban teachers.

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