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# Perceptions about Urban Schools: Changes in Preservice Teachers after Working in a City School

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*The study reports on changes in beliefs and attitudes toward urban schools evidenced by teacher candidates when engaged in a five week summer tutoring experience in a city school district. Beliefs at pre and post testing are presented descriptively, while changes between the two measures are presented in a matched-case method. Among the most significant changes in perceptions by teacher candidates are those associated with the school environment, specifically the commitment to diversity and the resources necessary for effective education. Teacher intern concerns shifted from larger macro-level issues such as quality of building and adequacy of teaching resources to micro-level ones including students' learning abilities, general student health, parental involvement and support.*

## Introduction

The challenges facing urban schools are multifaceted, inter-related, complex, and set in large socio-political and cultural contexts (Truscott & Truscott, 2005a; Stone, 1998; Weiner, 1993; 2000). Urban schools, especially those that serve diverse populations, face a critical shortage of qualified teachers that is projected to reach monumental proportions in the very near future. Programs to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers for high-need schools have not sufficiently addressed current shortages, let alone those that are projected in the coming decade (Pflaum & Abramson, 1990; Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000). Some demographic experts predict that the U.S. will require more than two million new teachers in the next ten years (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2002). Urban districts need to hire 700,000 new teachers in the coming decade to maintain current class sizes, given projected enrollments.

Teacher retention in urban schools is a growing problem across the country that exacerbates teacher shortages (Truscott & Truscott, 2005b). For example, over one-third of the teachers in New York State leave their jobs within the first five years (Voell, 2000) and in urban schools nearly half of the teachers leave within three years (Strachan, 2001). In 2000, one in five teachers in Colorado left their teaching positions and one of ten left the teaching profession altogether (Basile, 2006). Teachers in high poverty settings face many challenges such as racial and cultural differences between the predominantly White, middle

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class teachers and minority, poor students (Haberman, 1995), fewer resources, larger class sizes, and lower salaries (Kozol, 1991; Weiner, 2000). Schools with high-poverty and high-minority concentrations have attrition rates 9% higher than other schools (Basile, 2006). As a result teachers either take positions in school systems outside the metropolitan arena (Quality Counts, 2003) or leave the teaching profession (Quartz & TEP Group, 2003)

Academic achievement, a significant problem in many high need urban schools, ranks as the most pressing need by the majority of urban school leaders in the country (Lewis, Ceperich, & Jepson, 2002). However, recent findings suggest that access to qualified, certified teachers is the key to closing the achievement gap that exists for inner city children (Quality Counts, 2003). Studies indicate that students of well prepared, certified teachers outperform students whose teachers are not fully qualified or licensed (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Yet, urban districts have disproportionate numbers of uncertified teachers. Students in schools characterized as high-poverty, low-performing and with segregated minority populations are five times more likely than students in high-achieving schools to have a teacher who has not met minimum state requirements for teaching certification (Center for Future of Teaching and Learning, 2002).

Across the country, colleges and universities that provide quality teacher preparation programs have embedded situated experiences prior to student teaching as a crucial component in helping teacher candidates develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for careers in education. Those institutions located in large urban areas also must respond to the need for supporting the school community by focusing preparation on the recruitment, specialized instruction and retention of qualified, certified teachers for the area. At the Center for Excellence in Urban and Rural Education at the Buffalo State College, one of the key objectives is providing teacher candidates with well planned and relevant experiences in high need urban and rural schools within the Western New York area. Supervising faculty and cooperating teachers have suggested that many teacher candidates begin their school-based experiences with genuine fears and apprehensions about the level of physical safety afforded and the potential for classroom management problems. Our belief has been that a variety of mentored urban school-based experiences can serve to de-mystify school settings that are different from those attended by many of our teacher candidates. Additionally, we wondered how well teacher candidates felt their coursework had prepared them to function in urban classrooms that are highly diverse, and described as high-poverty, low-achieving settings. Previous work in this area reports disconnects between teacher education curriculum, and preservice teachers beliefs and understandings. Research indicates that

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“method courses and field experiences often introduced ideas and concepts that preservice teachers did not accept” but that fieldwork with children in educational settings can foster change in both preservice teachers beliefs and practices (Clift & Brady, 2005, p. 315). Our anecdotal experiences suggest that working for a time in an urban school left many teacher candidates with changed perspectives and stronger desires to consider working in a high-needs district, but we had not conducted any structured evaluation of these effects and changes.

### *Focus of the Study*

The purpose of the study was to examine whether providing an extended, mentored teaching opportunity (in addition to any regular certification program fieldwork) for preservice teachers (K-12) would foster changes in beliefs and attitudes toward teaching and learning in urban schools. We focused on measuring the changes in beliefs and attitudes toward urban schools evidenced by teacher candidates when exposed to a five week summer tutoring experience in a city school district. Beliefs, at pre and post testing, are presented descriptively, while changes between the two measures are presented in a matched-case method. Our underlying perspective for this study was to support a non-directional hypothesis that spending time in urban schools may change attitudes about self and schools. We were also interested in candidates' interest in working in an urban school and their desire to remain in the immediate Western New York area upon graduation. This last area of inquiry was driven by our local educational job market which is oversupplied with certified teachers in a region with a declining and aging population base. For many candidates who wish to remain in the area, working in one of the urban or small city school districts in Western New York is one of the bright spots in an otherwise difficult job market.

### **Methods**

For our initial study, we chose a large, in-school tutoring program run in partnership between the Center for Urban and Rural Education at Buffalo State College and a Western New York urban school district. In its fourth year, this program selects teacher candidates (college students), enrolled in teacher preparation programs (PreK-12) to serve as mentors and tutors during an intervention enrichment program for improving the academic achievement of struggling inner city students. Participating college interns were selected based on their academic standing (GPA, English and Math competency tests) and program status (juniors and seniors). A total of 84 teacher candidates participated in this program; 54 secondary education majors (42 females, 12 males) and 30 elementary/middle level majors (24 females, 6 males). Similar to national profiles of students interested in becoming a teacher (Roden &

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Truscott, 2006), the majority of the interns in the sample were Caucasian females.

The 84 interns received six hours of training and orientation specific to urban education and pedagogical strategies in addition to the formalized teacher education courses and methods provided through their program. Intern tutors then worked in 10 public schools (6 high schools, 1 middle level, 3 elementary) across the city to provide assistance to a wide grade range of students who have been identified by the school as at-risk for not meeting state standards in math or English Language Arts. During the 5 week tutoring experience in the urban schools, the teacher interns were expected to plan and manage instruction (small group and individualized), work with supervising teachers and be observed by an experienced teacher. In addition to an observation rubric completed by the supervising teacher, candidates complete a self assessment and have a conference to discuss the results of this feedback.

During the initial orientation and training session, teacher interns were given an inventory to measure their levels of concern relative to their urban school placement, a self assessment of their degree of preparation and their desire to remain in the area and work in an urban school. At the conclusion of the 5 week tutoring experience, teacher candidates were given the same inventory, in addition to an instrument to assess their overall satisfaction with the program and their assessment of the degree to which the program impacted their beliefs.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

To measure the perceptions and beliefs about urban schools, we developed an instrument called the Urban Perceptions Survey. For our initial item pool, we selected items and a scale design from the National Center for Educational Statistics' (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey for 2003-2004. Using a four point anchored Likert type scale, these questions used prompts that indicated possible items of concern such as "student possession of weapons" and included a scale response ranging from "not a concern" to "major concern". A total of two initial item screening and selection rounds were conducted with a panel of eight faculty members with extensive experience in urban schools. A draft instrument was shared with Education faculty who suggested the inclusion of additional items to address knowledge of New York State learning standards, classroom management issues and specific attributes such as ability to dress professionally. Some survey items may appear to have negligible worth (such as ability to dress professionally, ability to find the school, etc.), however, we included them because they have inferential value regarding the perception of the professional quality of an urban educator and misconceptions about neighborhoods and urban living. Questions related to interest in working in an urban environment

and staying in the Western New York area were added as yes/no response items. Additionally, a unique nominal identifier (last four digits of student ID) was used to match pre and post surveys.

During the late spring, a total of 84 junior and senior teacher candidates were given the Urban Perceptions instrument as part of their orientation to the tutoring program. They were placed in 10 schools within the same large city school district and began their 5 week tutoring experience, logging a total of 95 hours each. At the conclusion of the experience, the same Urban Perceptions instrument was administered, in addition to a post-experience inventory.

### Results

After matching pre experience surveys (n=84) and post experience surveys (n=75), we had a total of 52 matched cases. In many cases, the ID numbers provided by the candidates for matching purposes were not consistent and required some "cleaning up" after the fact. This matching method will need to be revisited on subsequent administrations to support a higher match rate.

TABLE 1  
*Items with Significant Change from Pre to Post Survey*

Item Text	Z	Pre "A major / moderate concern" Pct	Post "A major / moderate concern" Pct
My ability to find the school on the first day	-2.5 *	21.2	11.5
My ability to dress professionally for a school setting	-2.3 *	9.6	7.7
Student possession of weapons	-3.8 **	47.1	15.3
Not finding a supportive environment for people from different cultures / ethnic groups	-3.4 **	32.6	13.4
The school's ability to provide effective education despite budget problems	-3.4 **	53.9	30.8
The school's ability to make changes to support education	-3.0 **	42.3	26.9
The school's ability to provide resources for learning	-3.7 **	57.7	25
The school's physical plant and infrastructure	-2.1 *	21.2	9.6

\* > .05; \*\* > .01

Of the matched cases, we noted that nearly 89% reported that they did not graduate from an urban high school. Nearly three-fourths of the respondents reported that they hoped to remain in the Western New York area after graduation. All, but one, of the respondents at post survey reported that they would consider working in an urban school district after graduation. Clearly, this suggested a group of candidates

who were motivated to explore the idea of teaching in an urban school, despite their lack of personal experience in this environment.

Differences between pre and post surveys were examined using the Wilcoxon non-parametric test for paired samples. Given the response patterns observed, we chose this non-parametric measure of change between pre and post survey rather than the use of effect sizes as a more conservative statistical approach given the ordinal scaling of these data. Results are presented in Table 1, below. From the 20 items presented on the survey, significant change from pre to post survey were found for 5 items at the .01 level and 3 items at the .05 level.

Five of the eight items representing significant change referred to perceptions about the environment of the school and what they thought it had (or not) to offer children. The tutoring experience offered the college interns an opportunity to observe how urban classrooms work and changed their thinking about the support and commitment for diversity and academic achievement. One of the most significant change items related to the perception that weapon possession is a common phenomenon in urban schools. This perception changed the most based on the tutoring experiences in schools. Teacher candidates realized after working with students closely for five weeks that they weren't all carrying handguns around. Finally, the misconception that transportation within a city center is difficult to negotiate was challenged as interns realized that they could easily find their way to the school, even though it was located downtown.

Equally interesting are those items ranked as either a moderate or major concern for college interns at the beginning and end of the five week experience (Table 2). Three items remained constant as perceived areas of concerns by the teacher interns: 1) students coming to school ready to learn; 2) student respect for teachers; and 3) classroom management. Two new areas of concern emerged for teacher interns after the experience: parent involvement and students general health.

TABLE 2  
*Items Most Highly Ranked as Moderate to Major Concerns at Pre and Post Survey*

" To what extent do you feel that the following issues will be of concern to you in your tutoring experiences at urban schools?"	Pre Survey	Post Survey
Students coming to school ready to learn	65.4%	57.7%
Student respect for teachers	53.9%	48.1%
My ability to manage student behavior	53.8%	48.1%
Parent involvement	50%	40.4%
Student's general health	42.3 %	34.6%

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## Discussion

We found these results interesting in that they suggested a change overall in how this group of young people viewed city schools. As is the case for many college students considering teaching as a profession, the majority of our interns were White females who did not come from an urban school. Interns held stereotypes about what they expected to see in an urban school including charged violent environments and deteriorating buildings. Prior to visiting the school the first time, nearly half the teacher candidates expressed concerns about students' weapon possession. However, after simply spending time in an urban school, interns were able to change their schema for the type of learning that could occur there. Interns' general concerns about the lack of resources for education and physical plant seemed to diminish over the course of the experience as well. It is important for teacher interns to experience this type of school-based teaching activity early on in their teacher preparation program because it establishes a type of cognitive set that yields greater learning potential. Helping potential urban educators, especially if they do not come from an urban environment, envision that positive learning climates can exist in urban schools paths the way for considering new pedagogies and possibilities during formal teacher training.

This study found that at the conclusion of the experience, many of the teacher candidates voiced new concerns, not related to their own well being or competence, but related to the students they taught including concerns about student readiness to learn, family support and general health. Teaching experiences in real urban schools afforded these interns opportunities to understand urban students a little better and to recognize the importance of a teacher's knowledge and application of strategies to meet the needs of students who enter school less prepared. In a sense, teacher intern concerns shifted from larger macro-level issues (building, resources,...) to micro-level ones (students' abilities, health, parents,...). It is unclear whether an increase in interns' concerns over parent involvement was the result of actual familial interactions or the result of discussions with the classroom teachers. Communication with parents during the summer tutoring was not among the responsibilities of the interns. Therefore, we suspect that concerns about parental involvement and their influence on academic achievement of the students were expressed by the classroom teachers and hence adopted by the interns; warranted or not. Indeed, previous research reports evidence that educator beliefs can change with training and experiential interventions, however, the direction of those changes may be unpredictable (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon, 1998). Helping teachers work with parents as educational partners is an ongoing area of professional development

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and advanced graduate work. Teachers report that it is a major concern and often express frustrations that may be explained by a lack of understanding of culture and class differences. In addition, it is disappointing to note that respect for the teacher was a reported concern both before and after the intern's experience. This suggests some of the preconceived perceptions about teacher-learner interactions were reinforced based on the experience. Results of this study suggest that follow up training with college interns regarding these issues (parents, teacher respect) would be important in order for new teachers to enter schools with the confidence and attitudes necessary for working well with parents and building a respectful learning community in their classrooms.

### **Implications**

National discussions continue on the need for recruiting more entering college students into the field of education and specifically becoming an educator and administrator in an urban school setting. Some strategies target recruitment efforts on large metropolitan areas in order to take advantage of the fact that many graduates return home to work after graduation and enter the program with greater understandings of urban schools and experiences. We, too, have observed this to be the case. However, results from this study, suggest that even when teacher candidates do not originate from a city center they can change where they envision themselves teaching after graduating—even in environments that are foreign to them. This implies that teacher candidates need to be required to participate in specialized teaching experiences in high-need schools in order to develop positive cognitive sets about teaching and learning in urban schools. Our study suggests that these experiences are powerful early on in the teacher preparation program in order to build the skills and strategies needed to feel more confident in supporting students in high-need schools and to help develop a teacher workforce that will stay in the area and not return to suburban home bases. We note, however, the problems of teacher retention in urban settings and that by helping new teachers commit to teaching in urban schools where there are no adequate quality teacher induction programs in place is problematic to say the least.

Another implication of the study is that school-based teaching experiences may have a greater effect if they involve personal interactions and directly work with students in the school rather than experiences where interns remain on the periphery (e.g., observations, simulations, analogues). Among the most significant changes in perceptions by teacher interns related to more positive attitudes about urban schooling. However, this change in perceptions may be attributed to the intensive, and somewhat personal, experiences with the students

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and the classroom teacher during the process. The program in this study really focused the experience at the classroom level and the interns had limited opportunities to interact with the school as a whole. Interns perceptions of urban “schools” were changed because of their experience with urban “classrooms”. However, as was the case with the development of new concerns over parental involvement and a lack of respect for the teacher, we strongly believe that the school-based experience needs to also contain a mediation component, perhaps back on the college campus, that helps interns thoughtfully process and reflect upon all that they have experienced directly.

Overall, results from this study suggest that school partnerships with teacher education programs in colleges and universities can effectively respond to the need for more qualified, certified teachers for metropolitan area schools. The impact of spending time in an urban school can be significant and provide young people with both personal growth as well as a better window into the world of a city school and its students. It also offers ways for teacher education departments to assess their current programs to ensure that perceptions, such as those found here, are discussed and that changes resulting from school partnership experiences are expanded upon and reinforced as appropriate.

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