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# PREPARING FUTURE URBAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS: The Perceptions of Student Teachers in Urban-Comer and Non-Comer Settings

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"If I had done my student teaching in a school like this, I would have been better prepared!" (First semester Comer school teacher).

In an attempt to help preservice teachers gain an understanding of the profession and the challenges they will encounter as professional educators, schools and colleges of education provide foundations courses. These courses have traditionally included content related to history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. More recently, preparation in educational foundations courses has come to include studies related to the cultural bases of education. However, foundations course work designed to teach preservice teachers about the multicultural needs of youth has not prepared individuals for the urban classroom (Grant, 1994).

Success as a teacher in many of today's inner-city schools is not easily attained. Because of dwindling resources, high poverty rates, overcrowding, wide-ranging language abilities and academic skills, chronic absenteeism, violence, and motivation problems, which are exacerbated by poverty (Reed &

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Simon, 1991), most new teachers are overwhelmed with the problems they encounter in inner-city schools. Aaronsohn, Carte, and Howell (1995) assert that part of the problem is a result of limitations in teacher preparation programs. They conclude that a majority of current teacher education graduates are unprepared to deal with the challenges they encounter in inner-city schools.

This lack of preparation manifests itself in several ways. Administrators in urban schools find it difficult to attract and retain capable teachers. Paine (1989) reported that new teachers tend to seek jobs with populations similar to their own. According to Gallegos (1995), many new teachers who accept positions in urban schools almost immediately "... plan their escape—to non-teaching or administrative positions in suburban school systems" (p. 783). Haberman (1995) indicated that approximately half of the traditionally prepared newcomers to urban schools either quit or fail within five years.

Field experiences have become an integral part of teacher education programs. Ladson-Billings (1994) predicts that if teachers are to be successful, they must be prepared to teach racially different children. Yet today's teacher training institutions often provide field experiences under ideal conditions (Haberman, 1995). This practice results in preservice teachers having limited opportunities to work with a diverse range of children.

To increase the likelihood of success for future urban teachers, teacher educators should provide preservice teachers with more experiences in urban schools. "Best practice," writes Haberman (1995), would be to learn "effective practice under the worst of conditions" (p. 778). Extending this postulate, Haberman states that the "most reasonable basis for awarding teaching licensure would be to prepare teachers in the poorest schools" (p. 778).

Programs preparing preservice teachers in urban settings have been successful. Pagano, Weiner, Obi, and Swearingen (1995) and Aaronsohn (1995) found that students who had been involved in preservice experiences in urban schools were more comfortable and, in some cases, motivated to want to teach in urban settings. Stallings and Quinn (1991) reported that individuals who participated in preservice urban field experiences expressed a greater interest in teaching in urban schools and actually got jobs in inner city schools. Further, they had principals who reported high levels of teacher success.

Washburn University adopted an urban mission in 1992 and the university's teacher education program began assigning a greater proportion of students to field experiences in urban schools. In that year the teacher education program joined the Comer School Development Program (SDP) and formed a school-university partnership with the Topeka Public Schools. This is one of three such partnerships in the country.

The Comer School Development Program has potential for contributing to the preparation of preservice teachers. Comer's SDP is an intervention program developed by James P. Comer and his associates at Yale Child Development Center (Comer, 1980). The program targets schools with poor minority youth, and is designed to improve children's school environments by facilitating greater communication between the home and the school. Comer (1980) concluded that children's school and home experiences have profound effects on their psychological, social, and academic development.

One goal of the Comer program is to create a sense of community among the parents, teachers, and staff. Parents and community members are invited to social events held at the schools. In many Comer schools special rooms have been set aside for parents.

When Comer's principles are applied to school settings, schools have been found to be more successful, particularly in the areas of academic achievement, attendance, and social skills (Comer, 1980; Deem, 1995; Ramirez-Smith, 1995). More specifi-

cally, one school in North Carolina raised SAT scores by an average of 16 points, boosted the honor roll by 75 percent, and increased the attendance rate dramatically (Deem, 1995).

Currently the Comer process is operating successfully in over 250 schools in 19 states. By joining into a collaborative partnership with the Topeka Public Schools, Washburn faculty felt they could improve the quality of the teacher preparation process. Faculty hypothesized that field experiences in Comer schools and the sense of community created in these schools would have a positive effect on the preparation of future teachers.

### The Study

In joining into a school-university partnership, we have made several changes in the way we prepare preservice teachers.

With an urban mission and a commitment to the Comer Program, we have elected to emphasize field placements in urban Comer schools. For example, we have a two semester early field component in which students attend seminars and spend 35 hours per semester in two different classrooms. At least one of these assignments must be in an urban school, preferably a Comer school. Elementary students also participate in practicums as they complete three methods blocks. One of the practicums is set entirely in Comer elementary schools. A sizeable portion of the students in the second and third practicums are assigned to Comer schools. Prior to student teaching, all students have worked in at least two Comer classrooms.

Not all of our student teachers can be assigned to Comer schools. First, there are not sufficient placements in Comer schools. Second, most of our preservice teachers are from suburban or rural backgrounds and want to secure teaching positions in their communities. They request placements in suburban or rural schools. Third, although students have had several practicum experiences in Comer schools, some of our students actively avoid student teaching assignments in urban schools. Therefore, we routinely assign student teachers to four different types of elementary schools. The four options include urban schools affiliated with the Comer process, urban schools not associated with the Comer process, suburban schools, and rural schools.

### Problem

This study was designed to determine the effects student teaching placement had on the student teachers' views regarding their (a) student teaching assignments, (b) perceived abilities to work with students in a variety of socioeconomic and cultural settings, and (c) preferences for future teaching positions. The following four questions emerged.

First, did student teachers assigned to urban-Comer schools adapt well to their student teaching assignment? This question was placed on the questionnaire to help rule out possible bias resulting from students who may have been dissatisfied with their student teaching placements. As mentioned earlier, some students tried to avoid placements in urban schools.

Second, did student teachers assigned to urban-Comer schools develop an adequate understanding of the multicultural needs of students? Many of our graduates are assigned to urban schools and, as the introductory quote suggests, are not prepared for the challenges they encounter.

Third, did student teachers assigned to urban-Comer schools see themselves as effective teachers in inner-city, suburban, and rural settings? Haberman (1995) advocated placement in challenging settings. Do student teachers placed in urban-Comer schools perceive themselves as better prepared for teaching positions in a variety of schools?

Fourth, did student teachers assigned to urban-Comer schools prefer future teaching positions in urban settings? This may be the acid test of teacher preparation programs with

urban missions. If preservice teachers are more inclined to accept teaching positions in urban settings, the university has achieved a degree of success in overcoming the problems cited earlier by Paine (1989) and Gallegos (1995).

### Method

Questionnaires were completed by 128 elementary student teachers at meetings following the end of their student teaching semester. This response rate represents 89.5% of the 143 students enrolled in student teaching over a period of five semesters.

One hundred twenty-two of the student teachers were white, one was black, four were Hispanic, and one was Asian Indian. The sample included 116 female and 12 male student teachers. Washburn University has a sizeable number of non-traditional students, thus the mean age of the university's undergraduate student body is 28.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained six Likert-type questions. An additional question asked student teachers to indicate preferences for future teaching positions. The Likert questions asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (a value of one) to strongly agree (a value of five).

The question eliciting student teachers' preferences for future teaching positions required students to rank three options. The three options included urban, suburban, and rural settings.

An analysis of variance procedure was used to compare the mean scores of the four student teacher groups relative to the Likert-type questions. In instances where significance was found, a t-test procedure was used for pair-wise comparisons of the mean scores of the student teacher groups (at the 0.05 level of significance). A chi square procedure was used to compare the four student teacher groups' preferences for teaching positions.

### Results

The first question asked student teachers to indicate how well they adjusted to their student teaching assignments. There were no significant differences in the mean scores of the four groups (see Figure 1).

The second question required student teachers to indicate the adequacy of their understanding of multicultural needs of children. Significant differences were present in comparisons of student teachers' understanding of multicultural needs of students ( $F=5.41$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) (see Figure 1). The differences were present in mean score comparisons of urban Comer ( $X=4.61$ ) versus suburban ( $X=4.18$ ), urban Comer ( $X=4.61$ ) versus rural ( $X=3.86$ ), urban non-Comer ( $X=4.70$ ) versus suburban ( $X=4.18$ ), and urban non-Comer ( $X=4.70$ ) versus rural ( $X=3.86$ ). There were no significant differences in the mean score comparisons of urban Comer and urban non-Comer student teachers, nor in the mean score comparisons of suburban and rural student teachers.

The third question had three subquestions that allowed student teachers to indicate the degree to which they felt they were prepared to assume teaching positions in inner-city, suburban, and rural schools. There were no significant differences in the mean scores relative to preparation to teach in suburban schools. There were significant differences in the mean scores of student teacher groups regarding their preparation to teach in rural schools ( $F=7.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and their preparation to teach in inner-city schools ( $F=5.92$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) (see Figure 1).

Significant differences of mean scores regarding preparation to teach in rural settings were found to exist between the following student teacher groups: urban Comer ( $X=4.18$ ) and urban non-Comer ( $X=4.59$ ), urban Comer ( $X=4.18$ ) and rural ( $X=5.0$ ), urban Comer ( $X=4.18$ ) and suburban ( $X=4.72$ ), and

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