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**Preparing Teachers for Urban Schools: A View from the Field**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Schools in large urban centres are places where teachers are faced with a plethora of challenges that range from poverty, violence, cultural diversity and a multitude of languages. Successful teaching in these low-income, urban, multicultural schools is different from teaching in suburban settings, which have more homogeneous student populations, more parental support and more stable student populations.

Wright (1981) says that students in urban schools need dedicated teachers who respect children and youth, who actually believe they can and will learn if properly taught, and who understand the types of homes and cultures from which the children come. Haberman (1992) argues that successful teaching in low-income, urban, multicultural schools is a different order of teaching. Maeroff (1988) supports this contention by stating that minority students need teachers who inspire them, who have rapport with them, who have high expectations of them, and who can provide students with supportive environments which bolster their confidence. She states that these teachers need to be able to communicate with the parents, to modify the curriculum where needed, and to have the skills and the time to talk with students about life and its problems.

Preparing teachers for these challenging environments is a problem which many faculties of education are beginning to examine more closely. "Preparing preservice teachers for their future classrooms becomes more complex as the school population becomes more diverse. Changing demographics require changing teacher education strategies" (Fuller, 1994, p. 270). Faculties of education are realising that prospective teachers need more than a general education. They need "specialised knowledge of the lives and learning styles of the urban child, first hand experiences in urban schools, and an understanding of the community from which the child comes" (Reed and Simon, 1991 p. 32). Stallings, Bossung & Martin (1990) express the opinion that too often new teachers who have received their field experience in the suburbs are hired to teach in multicultural, inner-city schools with little preparation to serve this population of children and families. Throughout the literature there are exaltations to faculties of education to change and improve the teacher preparation programs to address the special needs of teachers in inner city schools.

In order to improve the preparation of teachers for urban classrooms a network of faculties of education and schools in Canada and the United States has been founded. The Urban Network to Improve Teacher Education (UNITE) joins nine universities together in a project to develop teacher preparation curriculum which can infuse a broad-based, experiential urban focus into the preparation programs for new teachers. Those participating include Central Connecticut State University, Indiana State University, University of Louisville, University of Miami, Ohio State University, Simon Fraser University, Teachers' College - Columbia University, College of Tennessee and the University of Toronto.

As part of the UNITE project the nine faculties of education are involved in a variety of initiatives within their own faculties and in urban schools. At the University of Toronto a number of pilot projects are being worked on which will assist us in developing and implementing a greater urban focus into the teacher preparation programs.

As we worked on these and other UNITE projects our curiosity was piqued around the topic of practising teachers' perceptions of teaching in urban schools; what they identified as the challenges and what they felt faculties of education could do to prepare teachers more effectively for teaching in these challenging environments. We believe that teachers bring a great deal of experience and insight to their teaching, and that by encouraging them to reflect on their practice and why it is successful, much can be learned about teacher needs and preparing teachers for urban schools. The study presented in this paper was done as part of the UNITE project, and the findings will be shared with those universities participating in the project. These findings will add to the body of work being collected by the nine participating universities as we continue to explore ways to more effectively train teachers for urban settings.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**  
  
The purpose of the study was to explore a number of questions around preparing teachers to be better teachers in urban schools. We were interested in talking with teachers who had had a variety of experiences, those who were new to the profession, as well as those who had taught for many years. We also wanted to find out what they saw as the major differences between urban schools and other schools: in other words, what made them urban, inner-city schools. Our questions focussed around a number of areas. These included teacher preparation, day-to-day life for teachers in these schools, and what recommendations urban teachers had for teacher preparation programs.

We wanted to ask teachers how they felt we could "introduce teachers to the profession humanely, in ways that engender self-esteem, competence, collegiality and professional nature" (Colbert, 1992, p. 193), especially to urban school settings.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the characteristics of urban schools?

2. What are the challenges of teaching in these urban schools?

3. What are the qualities of successful teachers in urban schools?

- Can these qualities be learned?

- What special skills/knowledge do teachers in urban schools need?

- How do teachers in these schools stay motivated?

4. How can preservice teacher education programs better prepare teachers for urban schools?

5. If you could have a resource wish list, what would it contain?   
  
**METHODOLOGY**

Sampling Identification

Three schools, two elementary schools and one secondary school, were involved with this project. These schools are all inner-city schools in the greater Metropolitan Toronto area of Ontario, Canada. The schools were identified by the central office of each participating school district. Criteria for selection involved identifying schools with the following characteristics:

- urban school,

- diverse multicultural student population,

- willingness to participate in the project.

The number of students enrolled in the three schools ranged from 198 to 1300 students, and the number of staff paralleled this range with the smallest school having 20 staff members and the largest school having approximately 100 staff members. All the schools in the study had a diverse, multicultural student population, a large proportion of whom spoke a language other than English as their first language. As well, they all reported having an extremely high turnover rate of students.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze data from the participating schools. Two methods of data collection were employed. These were focus group interviews and detailed questionnaires. Within each of the identified schools focus group interviews with selected teachers were conducted. Teachers were identified and selected by the principal, or were self-selecting. Administrators were given the following guidelines for selection of participants:

- participants represented a range of years of teaching experience,

- participants represented a variety of roles and responsibilities,

- participants, in the secondary schools, represented different subject areas.

Altogether 27 teachers and administrators participated in the focus group discussions. In two of the schools two focus group interviews were conducted in order to increase the participation of teachers and maintain the group size at six or less. In the third school only one focus group interview was conducted with six participants. An additional separate interview was conducted with the principal at each school. Questions in these interviews expanded the information related to the school profile and needs.

To support the data gathered in the focus group interviews, all participants were asked to independently complete a detailed questionnaire. The questionnaires focussed on personal data, for example, teaching experiences in urban schools, preservice preparation and previous employment, as well as individual comments related to preparation for teaching.

Another data source was a previous UNITE project which was conducted at another urban school involved in the project. The data included focus group interviews with eleven teachers from the school, and similar questions were asked during the discussions. The data from this study was included as a source as we examined and analyzed the findings.

A review of the literature was done with a focus on preparing teachers for urban schools, school/university partnerships, and the needs of urban schools in the 90s. All focus group interviews were conducted by two researchers. In order to increase reliability each researcher collated and examined the data independently. This was followed by a collective analysis in which common themes were identified. No areas of discrepancy occurred between the researchers' independent analyses. There was, however, some discussion around degree of emphasis of characteristics. A re-examination of the original transcripts clarified the varying degrees of emphasis.

**FINDINGS**

The findings are an analysis of the data collected from the focus group interviews, the interviews with the principals, and the questionnaires. Throughout this presentation excerpts from the interview transcripts are included to allow the participants' voices to be heard. Following a brief profile of the participants involved with this study, their thoughts, ideas, experiences and suggestions are shared under the following sub-titles:

A) Teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of an urban school

B) Challenges these characteristics present

C) Characteristics of a successful urban teacher

D) Improving teacher preparation programs

E) Motivation

F) Teacher wish list

Participant Profile  
  
Twenty-two teachers and five administrators were involved in focus group interviews conducted during the study. Over half of the 27 participants have been working in the field of education for less than five years, although four have been teaching in their present school for over 15 years. On average, the participants graduated from a faculty of education 11 years ago. The teachers interviewed represented all grade levels, from kindergarten to senior secondary, and represented a variety of subject areas and roles within a school community (e.g., physical education, visual arts, resource teacher, special education teacher).

All but one of the participants received their preservice education in the province of Ontario, and 45% of the teachers attended the preservice program at the University of Toronto. Most of the participants had been employed at some other occupation on a full-time basis prior to entering the teaching profession. These previous work positions included medical secretary, professional volleyball player, child therapist, office systems manager, social worker, computer operator, fitness instructor, construction worker and CUSO volunteer.

A) Teachers' Perceptions of the Characteristics of an Urban School

When asked to describe the characteristics of an urban school the participants in all focus group interviews focussed on the student population. The following characteristics were mentioned in all interviews:

- enormous cultural diversity

- low socio-economic status

- high immigrant / refugee population

- high population of students whose first language is not English

- high incidence of poverty

- variety of social problems (e.g., drugs, alcoholism,

dysfunctional families)

- high turnover rate of students

Other characteristics which teachers identified as being common to urban schools included:

- violence - in the family or in the neighbourhood

- wide variety / approaches of parenting skills

- students crave emotional attention, they carry 'baggage'

- high level of stress

- lack of parent involvement within the school program

B) Challenges These Characteristics Present

Emotional Needs of Students - The greatest challenge that was identified by all groups was dealing with the emotional needs of the students. Stories were shared in all focus group interviews that described the traumas that many of their students had experienced in their lives. Teachers described the refugee students who were often in Canada living with distant relatives, worrying about their immediate families who were far away. Others talked about students in their classes traumatised by murder, war, family break-up, and at the secondary level, students dealing with teenage pregnancy, abortion, suicide, and being the care-taker of younger siblings at home.

We just spend less time on curriculum and a heck of a lot of time on meeting the other needs. You couldn't possibly teach them how to multiply or read if they haven't got the basic essentials first.

I think the biggest challenge is emotional, dealing with these children and their baggage, getting them to trust you, and to a point where they're ready to learn.

The emotional support these kids need. You get very involved, you are their advocate. It gets very draining.

Program Modification - Meeting the wide variety of intellectual and academic needs of the students was also mentioned in all seven focus group interviews. Many teachers shared their frustrations with delivering the 'curriculum' they were hired to deliver, yet at the same time acknowledging and accommodating the fact that some students in their classroom have never been in school before and need to 'build the foundations and develop the basic skills.' On-going individual assessment and continual program modification presents a common challenge facing the teachers of these urban schools on a daily basis.

Every student in the classroom is such an individual, and every time you plan an activity you have to plan in such a way that the task is able to be done by everyone in the room. If you have someone that reads at a Grade 3 level and someone that reads at a Grade 9 level, and someone who can do math at a Grade 8 level, but only reads at a Grade 3 level, you have to plan for these students. It's a way of planning that is open-ended, that can be modified and individualized, so that each student can take it away and do at their level, but their level is planned on their strengths and weaknesses.

Language and Cultural Diversity - Another major challenge identified was dealing with the language and cultural diversity of the students in these schools. One administrator reported having a student population representing 40 nationalities and 23 different languages.

We have to understand the different cultures, the different religions. We have to know what we can or cannot do with the children, what field trips are appropriate, what they can eat.

English teachers at the secondary level discussed how their program is "moving away from text-propelled courses" in an attempt to recognise the diverse population of students they find in their classrooms.

For example, we feel that you cannot do justice to Dickens, so we don't do Dickens. Some of us are putting less emphasis on literature, per se, and doing more writing. If you've got kids from Hong Kong there are certain things we take for granted that they do not know. I've been trying to get more multicultural literature in the classroom, but we don't have the money to buy the multicultural texts. At the same time I don't want to see the classics eroded either.

Communicating with Parents - Dealing with the parents of students was another challenge that was frequently mentioned by the participants. Teachers at both the elementary and the secondary levels spoke of difficulties with finding time to spend with parents and guardians so that they could develop a rapport, as well as the challenge of getting parents and guardians to attend parent/teacher interviews. Language barriers also inhibited the communication process between parents and teachers. One administrator stated that the school's newsletter had to be translated into multiple languages, and translators had to be present for a large number of parent /teacher interviews. Overcoming the communication barrier was often followed by the challenge of dealing with the broad range of demands and expectations from parents.

Parents have different ideas about how important school is. Some parents don't think their kids should get homework, while other parents demand that their kids get homework.

Classroom Management - As well as those already mentioned, participating teachers frequently referred to the daily challenges of classroom management at both the secondary and elementary levels. Swearing, bullying, school yard fights, and classroom disruptions were a few of these challenges.

You've got kids bursting out at you for no reason because something minor has set them off and you have to settle them down and that is probably the biggest (challenge). I think connected to that is their low self esteem.

Student Mobility - The high turnover rate of students was another challenge that was frequently mentioned in all focus group interviews. One school reported a turnover rate of 33% each year, while another school reported a turnover rate of 50% every two years. As a result of this high mobility participants, especially at the secondary level, reported having few students at school assemblies and described it as "a disaster for our school spirit."

Due to the high mobility, fewer students have a stake in the school. For example, the Student Activity Council has changed to what's called the Super Council because the ethnic diversity is so varied we were finding that fewer and fewer kids felt that they had a stake in running the school. So with the Super Council we've gone to electing a representative from every club or team in the school, so that ethnic clubs for instance, will have direct involvement with Council, where they did not before. But we have fewer clubs now. We even lost the football team.

Changing Role of the Teacher - The last challenge that all participants talked about was the changing role of the teacher. Because of the multiple challenges facing teachers in urban schools today the traditional image of the teacher is no longer applicable. Teachers in urban schools have to take on the role of social worker, nurturer, appeaser, counsellor, as well as academic teacher.

My role has expanded into social work, being a mother as far as nurturing. Your scope has just opened because you have the curriculum, yet there's a peripheral that you have to work on constantly in order to tap in and get the kids hooked.

The expectation hasn't shifted, but the reality of the job has. So much more is involved in being a classroom teacher now, but for some reason the expectation, when we hear about it in the media, or when people are just sitting around discussing what it is to be a teacher, those expectations don't seem to have changed. As a matter of fact, if the expectations have changed I think they have gone in the other direction. There's a lot of pressure on schools, and that pressure is increasing.   
  
C) Characteristics of a Successful Urban Teacher  
  
Eight characteristics were identified in all focus group interviews as being important for teachers to possess in order to be successful in an urban school. These eight characteristics are discussed in order of the degree of emphasis placed on them by the focus group participants.

Empathy - Since many participants noted that they had never experienced many of the traumas and issues that their students are dealing with on a daily basis, they all strongly believed that teachers in urban schools need to be empathetic. Teachers mentioned the importance of "not placing your morals, judgments and values on the students and parents," and "making greater attempts at trying to understand the different cultures and religions."

Respect for the students - Threading through all focus group discussions were comments about teachers needing to respect students and to operate on the belief that all students have the right to learn, and to achieve success. Participants stated that teachers in urban schools should not compromise expectations, and that they should "believe that all students have a future."

Flexibility - Participants believe that teachers in urban schools need to be flexible. Teachers reported that this flexibility was necessary when dealing with such things as curriculum guidelines, programming, evaluation, classroom disruptions, and student behaviour. One teacher stated that, "You set up a wonderful day, and then it isn't working, and you have to step back and reassess. It's constant."

Self-care - In order to be a successful teacher in an urban school, participants stressed the need for caring for their personal needs. Since urban schools "really challenge you, you have to make sure you take care of the whole you, emotionally, physically, personally, and manage your stress. You have to find the balance."

Patience - Another characteristic that was shared in the focus group interviews was the need for teachers in urban schools to be patient. Dealing with the diverse population of students, and all of the other challenges previously mentioned, the need for 'infinite patience' was believed to be necessary in order to be successful as a teacher in an urban school.

Sense of humour - Participants in the focus group interviews strongly believed that in order to be a successful teacher in an urban school one must possess a sense of humour. One teacher described this need in connection with self-care, and stated that, "If you don't have the ability to laugh, you run the risk of becoming emotionally drained."

Collegiality - Another important characteristic for teachers in urban schools mentioned in all focus group interviews was collegiality and peer support. Participants described the need, especially in urban schools, for staff to work together, to "share their ups and downs," to share their resources, and to be there to support one another.

High energy level - In order to deal with the plethora of daily challenges facing urban school teachers, interview participants stated the need for these teachers to have high energy levels. A number of participants extended this characteristic to include a willingness "to make the commitment of time, energy and effort it takes to work in a school like this."

Others - Beyond the eight characteristics discussed already, the responses to this question included a variety of noteworthy comments:

Someone who could handle their own problems and not pass the buck to the administration. Not afraid of conflict. They can get in there and talk with the kids, and work it out themselves.

The best teachers are the ones that have been terrible students. Someone who has themself been the last in their class, knows where the kids are coming from.

They need a sense of showmanship.

They should be creative in the use and development of the strategies they use.

In all seven interviews discussion of the characteristics of a successful urban teacher inevitably led to a discussion on whether these characteristics were innate or could be learned. Two administrators mentioned that they have had excellent teachers enter their schools, yet 'not make it' due to the demands of teaching in these urban schools. The following three excerpts give an indication of the innate / learned debate that occurred in all of the focus group interviews.

To teach at an excellent level is a gift. I don't think faculties of education can touch that. It's in you. The gut feeling response that a teacher will have in response to a particular problem might be fostered by experiences, but a teacher will either have intuition or not have it.

People can change. I've seen it happen. People have been changed by the staff, the culture, the kids. I'm less concerned by who is picked by the faculties of education and what happens in there, and more concerned with whether they like working with other people and are willing to learn.

You can probably take a dozen people off the street and put them in here, if they have the right personality makeup, that is they can learn from other people and watch and keep their mouth closed and listen, they'll probably turn out as reasonable teachers. I'm not too concerned with the psychological make up of teachers coming in. I don't think you can teach it, or say here's what you need and if you don't have it don't go into it because who knows who's going to make a really good inner city teacher. I think you have to try it and learn.

There was general agreement that 'certain types' of people were more successful as teachers in urban schools than others, and that certain preparation and experience is critical in order to be successful.

D)Improving Teacher Preparation Programs

When asked to rate how well their preservice preparation programs prepared them to teach in an urban setting, on a scale from one (not prepared at all) to five (well prepared), 68% of the teachers gave a rating of three or less. Four participants identified their Special Education preparation as being the most helpful in their current role as a teacher in an urban school, and two participants identified their English as a Second Language courses as being the most useful. New and experienced teachers alike shared many recommendations on how to improve teacher preservice programs to better prepare teachers for teaching in an urban school. The interview discussions centred around three major areas: identifying candidates for teacher preparation programs; course work at the faculties of education; and the critical need for appropriate in-school experiences during the preservice program.

Identifying candidates for teacher preparation programs - All interview groups commented on the need for faculties of education to seriously address their admissions process. There was general agreement that the admissions process should include an interview to enable a more accurate assessment of an individual applicant to be made. It was felt that faculties of education overemphasise an unrealistically high academic requirement, whereas other factors, such as commitment and personality, were felt to be just as critical. One secondary teacher stated his belief that, due to the admission requirements, "student teachers are so persuaded that teaching is an academic endeavour that it's difficult for them to understand that teaching does not have much to do with subject disciplines in many regards."

Course work at the faculties of education - A number of comments were made with respect to the structure of preservice programs, specifically that the one-year programs should be extended to two years, and the concurrent programs are helpful in that they allow student teachers a greater amount of time to decide whether or not teaching is the right profession for them.

Many suggestions were made with respect to the content of the programs delivered at faculties of education. Participants agreed there was a need to equip student teachers with a broad repertoire of strategies in order to more effectively prepare them for the diverse needs of students in urban schools. Participating teachers suggested the following content areas be included in preservice programs: in-depth training in classroom management; how to plan for individual differences; and how to modify curriculum. It was also noted that student teachers should be made aware of the resources that are available to them, in order for them to continue, as practising teachers, to further broaden their repertoire of strategies.

Anti-racist training and conflict management were two other areas that were suggested by the participants to be addressed in faculty programs. One participant stated his belief that "the matter of violence is really going to be crucial in the next little while," and that new teachers should be "better prepared to deal with it."

Many participants commented that their preservice experiences focussed heavily on aspects of curriculum (guidelines, implementation, evaluation, lesson planning), and 'imparting knowledge,' at the expense of a focus on developing an understanding of children. One high school teacher recommended that secondary preservice teachers "have placement experiences in elementary schools, because they are going to be teaching kids rather than subjects."

Finally, a number of teachers mentioned how critical it is for preservice teachers to learn and develop the skills necessary to be reflective practitioners. Participants suggested that reflection be built into every component delivered in a preservice program. Within the broad area of reflection, it was also noted that since faculties of education "are showing teachers how to assess students, they must also show them how to assess themselves."

In all seven focus group interviews many issues were raised regarding the realistic picture that fails to be presented in preservice programs. Many questions were asked about how current faculty members were with respect to urban classrooms in the 90's, and suggested that practising teachers were probably better equipped to share their experiences with preservice teachers. The use of case studies was also recommended for use in faculty programs in order to depict the realities of urban schools. One participant, who had graduated from her preservice program two years earlier, mentioned that she learned about 'the bump system' in her classroom management classes, but in her current position as a teacher in an urban school "the top bump is reached by 8:46 in the morning!" She suggested that "the continuum of behaviour management strategies has to be extremely extensive, and maybe this can be accomplished through case studies."

In-school experiences - All participants agreed that stronger connections need to be developed between faculties of education and the schools that student teachers are placed in. There was also general agreement that preservice teachers should spend more time in schools, and that school experiences should be for longer periods of time, and in a greater variety of settings, which would include urban schools.

Teachers strongly stated their belief that the best preparation for teaching in an urban school was to have a practicum in an urban school where student teachers could get "a real feel for the school, as well as the class." Many suggestions focussed on the need for student teachers to have opportunities to become aware of the community that extends outside of the classroom setting. Attending curriculum evenings, sitting in on parent/teacher interviews, conducting home visits with their host teachers, and getting involved with extra-curricular activities were a few of the suggestions that might allow preservice teachers to develop a greater understanding of what it means to be a teacher in an urban school. One participant shared the value of being placed in a practicum prior to the school year starting, which enabled her to experience, first-hand, what it meant to set up a classroom. A number of participants suggested that student teachers be placed in classrooms in pairs to encourage "cooperative planning" and to "have somebody to reflect with."

Discussing the variety of ways to improve a preservice teachers' in-school experiences often led participants to talk about the quality of placements. Serious concerns regarding the process of selecting teachers as host teachers were shared by many participants.

But, if we extend the length of time (in practicums), the faculty has to be very careful about the situations that their faculty students get into so that it is a good learning opportunity for that student, that the host teacher is dedicated to helping that student along, and that their personalities seem to blend well. That requires an awful lot of communication between the faculty and the host schools. I can't think of anything worse than 13 weeks of a student being in with someone where they're not able to work cooperatively together.

I think the faculties of education have to take some real responsibility here and decide who is doing it right, and get those people in those schools. I don't think they're choosing their schools particularly carefully enough, and I think they're putting young people in classrooms to learn the craft of teaching and their mentor is mediocre at best. There isn't a mechanism that verifies good teachers would make good associate teachers. We let principals choose too many mediocre teachers. I think we've got to do a better job of this. The faculties of education are relying on the good will of school boards. We're not doing the faculties a favour, this is a professional responsibility. If we aren't responsible for the next generation of teachers, they'll be as bad or as good as luck will mandate. There are enough excellent people. We need exemplary teachers. Some people would say pay them to do that. I also think as professionals it is our responsibility to assist the profession.

E)Motivation  
  
In all seven focus group interviews there were common themes that were discussed when addressing the question of how to maintain a high level of motivation in an urban school. The response that was mentioned most frequently to this question was the support that these teachers felt from their teaching colleagues and from the administration. At each interview participants shared stories about how this support was facilitated and demonstrated in their school. One school had their weekly Wonderful Wednesdays to look forward to, where guest speakers were invited to address a variety of topics such as healthy eating, stress management, and technology in the classroom.

Another school staff shared how the teachers are encouraged to try out new ideas, and stated that the school "is not a top-down school, very few decisions are imposed, and staff feel that they have some stake in it."

Discussing motivation led many participants to talk about the empowering environments in which they work. During the focus group interviews both teachers and administrators openly shared their high regard for one another, and continually commented on the dedication of fellow staff members. Although participants listed numerous challenges of their day-to-day teaching, they were quick to state that one of the reasons they were able to deal effectively with these challenges was due to the fact that they were teaching in a school where there was a great deal of support and encouragement from their colleagues.

Many participants shared information on the various rewards that are a part of teaching in an urban school. On top of each reward list was always the children. Participating teachers felt that they made a difference in the lives of their students that they could see progress, and that it was sometimes the 'spark in their eyes' that kept them motivated. One teacher shared how the enthusiasm from her students 'rubs off' on her, and how she builds on strengths and "celebrates every small success along the way."

The final theme that arose in the interviews while addressing motivation, concerned the various approaches the participating teachers take to maintain a healthy and balanced life. A number of comments were shared that illustrate how the administration recognises that the teachers have "a life outside of school," and that family commitments and "outside school obligations" are acknowledged and respected by all staff members.

F) Teachers' Wish List

All participants in the focus group interviews identified the need for more resources as being a priority on their wish lists. Having access to a greater number of resources was frequently translated into more staff, both in the classrooms and as support workers. A number of participants mentioned the need for a full-time social worker and a full-time psychometrist to be placed in their school. A greater number of classroom teachers would decrease class size and enable the teachers to more effectively address the needs of the students.   
  
Up-to-date material resources, such as books, manipulatives and professional journals, were also mentioned in the focus group interviews. Teachers shared how textbooks and reading material must reflect the diverse population of the students in urban schools. One teacher noted that "a great deal of curriculum assumes that kids have had certain experiences" and although new curriculum is being developed it is not finding its way into the schools.

Participants also noted that increased funding for urban schools would allow teachers to provide students with experiences that might be taken for granted in middle class schools. One participant stated that, "these kids don't go to the zoo, or to the Science Centre. There's just not enough money at home."

The final item that all participants mentioned when discussing their wish list was more time. Teachers described the need for more time to plan, to observe, to assess and deal with the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. Administrators expressed the wish to have more time to facilitate talking and sharing amongst their staff members.

**CONCLUSIONS AND INSIGHTS**

For the most part the results of this study are straightforward, general, and a list of familiar points. It was interesting to the researchers that while the discussions with the teachers were passionate and indicated commitment and dedication, collectively their comments were neither illuminating nor provocative. Although the analysis of the data does not contribute new insights or perceptions, the data from the interviews does support the findings in the literature.

An important question to ask is, "Why might this be the case? Why is the data from teachers not more illuminating given their first-hand experience?" This may be a consequence of the methodology used by the researchers, or simply where these teachers are in terms of their urban consciousness. By this we mean that teachers tend to focus their energy and attention on the needs of the school in which they work, and may not be familiar with the literature, or for that matter, with what is happening in other schools within their own neighbourhood.

Consequently, when we talk to them about an urban context we tend to get insular and focussed descriptions of what is happening in their school, rather than a discussion of broader trends.

When we examine the findings in Section B of this paper, where teachers identified what the challenges were, we are left with the sense that all teachers, in all schools, need to be equipped with skills such as program modification, communication with parents, and classroom management, to name just three. It would be difficult to find a school where teachers viewed skills such as these as unnecessary for their practice. However, our discussions with the participants in this project indicate that these skills are even more critical for teachers working in challenging schools.

This has led us to question the clear distinction that is commonly made between urban and suburban schools. After examining this research data, as well as doing a review of the literature, we believe that it is almost impossible to classify schools into one or the other of these categories. Trying to do this may be an artificial exercise which does not represent reality.

In our opinion schools appear to have degrees of 'urbanness.' We would like to suggest that schools fit onto a continuum of urbanness, or a continuum of challenging needs, depending on the nature and degree of characteristics such as poverty, diverse ethnicity, high mobility and violence present in the school. For example, the three schools participating in this project would be placed at different points along the continuum, but all closer to the 'high' end of challenging needs.

'Urban' and 'suburban' are geographic descriptors that fail to reflect the complex and changing nature of schools today. Most teachers interviewed stated that their own teacher preparation programs did not adequately prepare them for dealing with the challenges of teaching in urban schools. We believe that all teachers need these skills, but, as we progress from the 'low' end of the continuum to the 'high' end of the continuum the development and refinement of these skills becomes increasingly more critical for teachers.

In examining this continuum, and reflecting on what the literature states, as well as the data from this project, we believe that faculties of education prepare teachers to teach in schools clustered around the 'low needs' end of the continuum. The practical components of preservice programs take place in these schools, and therefore these are the schools that faculty instructors are most familiar with.

However, the reality is that teaching jobs are available mainly in schools that would be placed near the 'high needs' end of the continuum, with the result that new teachers feel poorly prepared to cope with the challenges in these schools. An important observation that demands further examination is that no other profession gives their toughest 'cases' to beginning practitioners, although this seems to be the norm in education.

The participants in this project stated their belief that some personality types can cope with the special needs presented in challenging schools better than others. Teachers in these schools need to be more resilient and flexible, need to be patient, not easily offended, and unprejudiced. They did state however, that there were some basic pedagogical skills that could be taught in preservice programs which would better prepare new teachers for teaching in challenging schools.

Teachers and administrators also felt that faculties of education and schools need to work more closely in partnership to present a more realistic picture of the challenges present in many of today's schools, and to better prepare new teachers for the complexities of teaching in these environments. A major factor in better preparing teachers is to provide them with the opportunity to work in these schools during their preservice program. It is also critical that these beginning teachers be placed with exemplary teachers who can model and encourage best practice.

Educators identified the need for greater resources in these special needs schools. These included special professional support (eg. social workers), more appropriate curriculum resources, and an opportunity to provide these students with experiences which students in other schools may get in their home environments.

Despite the challenges, the teachers that we spoke with expressed a great deal of satisfaction with their jobs in these challenging schools. These teachers had discovered ways in which, not only to cope, but to turn these schools into professionally rewarding environments. Many of these schools had instituted programs which facilitated peer support, social activities for teachers, and had established professional, collaborative environments in which the voice of the teacher was acknowledged and respected. Most of the teachers stated that a supportive administration was a major contributing factor in making their school a good place to be for both staff and students.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations included below have been drawn directly from the participants in this project, as well as from the analysis and reflections of the researchers.

Partnerships

- Faculties of education and schools must work more collaboratively to effectively prepare and support teachers in more challenging schools.

- Schools and universities need to identify situations that can provide realistic learning environments for new teachers. These would be schools which present a plethora of challenging situations, but which are still good teaching arenas. These schools would be collaborative, supportive and professional environments, where teachers who have been identified as superior can act as supportive mentors and role models.

Faculties of Education

- Faculties of education need to develop an admissions process that goes beyond academic requirements and includes consideration of those characteristics which make for successful teaching in all schools, but are crucial for success in more challenging environments.

- Preservice programs should have a greater focus on the skills necessary to be an effective teacher in the more challenging schools of today, such as anti-racist training, conflict resolution, classroom management, child development, and modification of the curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse population of students.

- Preservice programs must provide longer and more appropriate in-school experiences. These experiences should include a greater variety of placements; longer, more intensive periods of time, and opportunities to develop an awareness of the community from which the child comes.

- Faculty of education instructors need to have knowledge and respect for the realities of today's students, schools and communities, and this in turn, needs to be acknowledged and rewarded by the university community.

Schools

- Schools must provide environments where the administrators are empowering, and the staff feel that their thoughts and ideas are valued and affirmed by one another, and that the school is a good place to be for all teachers and all students.

- The school should provide a variety of experiences for preservice teachers, such as classroom teaching, parent/teacher interviews, and an opportunity to get to know the community in which the school is situated.

- School districts and schools need to provide better resources for teachers in challenging schools. These include professional resources in the form of support personnel, such as psychometrists and social workers, as well as material resources in the form of curriculum materials that are designed to meet the needs of a diverse population of students.

Research

- More information needs to be collected around the realities and needs of educators teaching in challenging schools. This could include topics such as working with an ethnically diverse population, the impact of violence on schools, communicating with parents, and the impact of collaborative school cultures on staff and students.

- Teachers who express a great deal of satisfaction with teaching in challenging schools need to be heard more widely. Currently there is a very negative image of what it means to be a teacher in a challenging school, and these teachers can play a large role in providing a more positive perception of what it means to teach in a school with many special and challenging needs.

- A thorough examination needs to be made of the practice of placing novice teachers in the most challenging classroom situations. Such a study could include identifying the roles and responsibilities of universities, schools, districts and teacher federations with respect to teacher placement, induction support, and the on-going professional development of teachers.

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