

Urban Field Experiences and Prospective Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inner-City Schools

By Terrence C. Mason

Introduction

Leaders in teacher education today continue to be concerned that prospective teachers hold negative attitudes toward low-income, minority students in inner-city schools (Garcia, 1994). The attitudes with which they enter the profession are

important for several reasons. First, research findings have long suggested that teachers have lower expectations for low SES pupils' academic performance and minimize the role of ability in explaining their academic successes when they occur (Cooper, Baron, & Lowe, 1975). Second, low-income minority students already comprise a large proportion of the nation's school children, and demographic projections indicate that they will constitute an increasingly large proportion of students in the foreseeable future.

While one method of improving future teachers' attitudes toward such students has been direct exposure and interaction through field experiences, interpretations of recent studies of the impact of these programs have lead some educators to question the

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value of this approach (Haberman & Post, 1992). Indeed, some believe that this exposure increases rather than diminishes pre-service teachers' negative attitudes toward students and confirms their reluctance to seek positions in inner-city schools. In this article I will examine these conflicting views and offer some data that may help clarify this important and complex issue. I will consider the conditions under which experiences in inner-city schools can enhance pre-service teachers' attitudes toward urban schools, rather than reinforce negative stereotypes.

Issues and Research on the Urban Field Experience

A common suggestion for improving the preparation of teachers for inner-city schools has been the inclusion of an urban field experience prior to student teaching (Haberman, 1987). This experience would enable pre-service teachers to understand the unique conditions and demands of socially, culturally, and economically diverse groups of students by working with these students under the direction of successful urban educators. In a study conducted with Linda Post (1992), however, Martin J. Haberman found that students' initial attitudes toward low-income, minority students, whether positive or negative, were maintained in spite of completing a field experience with low-income, urban students. According to these authors, "people perceive what they believe" (Haberman, 1993, p. 86). Haberman hypothesizes that college students' beliefs about the educability of urban pupils stem from attitudes which are deeply enculturated and highly resistant to change.

In contrast to Haberman's results, others have found that field experiences have altered students' perceptions in significant ways. Based on a meta-analysis of the effects of early field experiences, Mark R. Malone (1985) concluded that its impact on pre-service teachers' attitudes and on their teaching performance may be the most profound among those students placed in low SES or disadvantaged schools. Pre-service experience with low SES, urban schools and students did prepare candidates for the job assignments in the less affluent communities that many beginning teachers receive. Malone further concluded that, when exposed to teachers working in low SES schools, many prospective teachers feel that they possess the energy and resources to educate students more effectively than the teachers they observe in those settings. Likewise, Wayne K. Hoy and Anita E. Woolfolk (1990) found that while teacher candidates expressed inability to overcome the limitations of some home environments, only pre-service teachers who were actually engaged in practice teaching regarded themselves as personally capable of motivating disadvantaged pupils. Similarly, in spite of the lack of attitude change, Haberman and Post (1992) did find that teacher candidates' sense of personal efficacy and motivation to pursue urban teaching was enhanced by the inner-city field experience. Nevertheless, their failure to develop more positive attitudes toward the learning potential of low-SES pupils lead Haberman and Post to minimize the value of the urban field experience. In a 1993 publication, Haberman felt strongly enough to describe the inner-city field experience as a

“fruitless path” lacking potential for changing prospective teachers’ beliefs or behavior (p. 85).

In addition to the analysis of the impact of urban field experiences, educators have also examined the potential benefits and drawbacks of early field experiences for pre-service teachers in general, raising questions about their purpose and value. Some conclude that field experiences encourage utilitarian teaching perspectives (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984) “that tend to encourage acquiescence and conformity to the existing, conservative routines found in the schools” (Goodman, 1986, p. 111). According to this view, if exposed to bias and the ineffective teaching practices of experienced teachers, one could not necessarily expect in-coming teachers to develop more positive attitudes toward poor or culturally different students simply by placing them in classrooms with practicing teachers. On the contrary, the opposite is likely to happen.

On the other hand, some educators suggest that, when properly supervised, early field experiences can lead prospective teachers toward richer understandings of the needs of today’s students and ultimately toward more effective teaching practices (Gipe, Duffy, & Richards, 1989). The key here is “when properly supervised.” Recently developed teacher preparation curricula have attempted to control the structure and content of pre-service teachers’ field experiences and have found that this approach does improve their ability to teach in culturally and socially diverse schools (Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Gipe, Duffy, & Richards, 1989).

Overall, research indicates that the purpose and value of pre-service field experiences, particularly in urban settings, remains under question. While some research has been conducted on the effects of inner-city field experiences, it is not clear whether such exposure enhances or diminishes pre-service teachers’ motivation to pursue inner-city teaching, and what elements are necessary in a field experience to provide positive learning opportunities for prospective educators.

Purpose of the Study

In response to the conflicting results of previous studies, the present study was conducted to assess changes in students’ attitudes toward inner-city teaching resulting from their participation in a field-based practicum in an urban elementary school classroom. In order to gauge the impact of urban-based field experiences rather than field experiences in general, urban-based pre-service teachers were compared with those who were placed in non-urban schools. The following research questions were addressed:

- (1) Do pre-service teachers become more positively disposed toward teaching in an urban setting as a result of an urban field experience?
- (2) Do pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inner-city, low-income, and minority students improve as a result of completing an inner-city field experience?

(3) How do attitudes toward low-income, minority students of pre-service teachers who complete an inner-city field experience compare with those who complete one in a suburban school attended predominantly by European-American, middle-class students?

Method

Subjects

Over a period of four semesters, data were collected on all (N=176) junior and senior level undergraduates enrolled in a program leading to elementary certification at a metropolitan, public university in New England. (Only those students who were absent when the questionnaires were completed were not included in the sample for this study). The sample was predominantly female (97 per cent) with less than five per cent of the participants in the program identifying themselves as belonging to a minority group. Based on background data gathered on these pre-service teachers, most of them had attended elementary and high school in predominantly white, middle-class communities.

Setting

In response to the changes in the state's school population and in an effort to improve its teacher preparation curriculum, multicultural perspectives were infused into course work in all education programs at the institution where this study was conducted. As a part of an introductory education course, students examined their own assumptions about ethnicity, social class, gender, and culture. Also considered was their understanding of how these factors influence students' success and failure in school. In methods courses, students were exposed to a variety of teaching practices that address diverse learning styles and a variety of orientations toward school learning.

As a requirement of the program, elementary education majors completed an eight-week, field-based practicum in conjunction with instructional methods courses in mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, and health, known as the "Methods Block." They spent two full days a week working with elementary students in one self-contained classroom under the supervision of the classroom teacher and a faculty member from the university's department of teacher education. During the practicum, they assisted the classroom teacher with pupils who needed extra help, provided small group instruction, and observed the classroom teacher. The pre-service teachers also planned and carried out a "mini-unit" of instruction based on social studies and language arts content.

Some of these pre-service teachers (n=75) were placed in "inner-city" schools in which a large proportion of the students were African-American and Hispanic and from low-income families. These schools were located in, or directly adjacent to, a large metropolitan area. While some volunteered to be placed in these settings,

others showed some interest in urban teaching, and still others were selected at random. Another group of students ($n=101$) were placed in suburban, middle-class schools for their practicum. Few minority or low-SES pupils attended these schools, although some schools participated in a busing program that brought in a small number of minority, inner-city pupils. These pupils represented less than two per cent of the total student population in the suburban schools. Background data on the sample of pre-service teachers indicated that the urban and suburban practicum groups were highly similar in their composition regarding gender, ethnicity, and prior experience in culturally diverse settings.

Measures

All pre-service teachers in the sample, those in both the urban and suburban field experiences, were administered a questionnaire at the beginning of the field experience to assess various attitudes related to inner-city teaching. They rated the extent to which they were interested in pursuing teaching in the inner city (5=very interested; to 1=not at all interested). In addition, based on some of the issues raised by Haberman (1987) and others, a set of potential problems associated with urban schools commonly cited by teachers was developed. Using a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating that it would not represent a problem and 10 indicating that it would represent a serious problem, they rated the extent to which they believed a series of educational issues posed difficulties for teachers in inner-city schools. They also rated the extent to which these same issues presented problems for teachers in suburban schools. These issues were student ability, language proficiency, motivation, parental support, cooperation with peers, general teacher morale, school discipline, and administrative support. In order to compare overall attitudes toward teaching in these two settings, ratings of these potential problems were combined to form an overall "inner-city" and "suburban" attitude rating. Cronbach Alpha coefficients of .83 (pre) and .91 (post) for the "inner-city" scale and .90 (pre) and .95 (post) for the "suburban" scale suggest that the eight items on each scale consistently measure a common construct that could be defined as "perceptions of teaching difficulty." At the completion of the eight-week field experience, these pre-service teachers were administered the same questionnaire.

Participants also responded to rating-scale type questions focusing on the impact of their methods courses and the field experience on their knowledge about cultural diversity and their preparation to teach in urban schools. At the end of the field experience they rated their perception of the overall quality of teaching displayed by the cooperating teacher in their field placement classroom, and provided written narrative comments on the impact of the field experience on their preparation for teaching.

Results

Based on the character of the schools where these prospective teachers completed their practicum, a “natural field experiment” was made possible for comparing the impact of the two types of field experience settings on attitudes toward inner-city students. While initially some of the inner-city practicum group expressed greater interest in pursuing teaching careers in the inner city, it was unknown whether that motivation would be maintained following the field practicum.

Interest in Urban Teaching

The effect of the field experience on interest in urban teaching was positive overall for all participants regardless of field placement. Ratings on the five-point “interest in urban teaching” scale increased from pre- to post for the urban field experience group, and initial differences were maintained between the urban group [$X=3.62$ (pre); 4.00 (post)] and the suburban group [$X=2.74$ (pre); 3.04 (post)] on the ratings of interest in inner-city teaching ($p \leq .0001$). In addition, following the field experience, 55 percent of the urban group indicated that they were more inclined to pursue inner-city teaching versus 20 percent of the suburban group. It therefore appears that the urban field experience had a salutary effect on the motivation of these prospective elementary teachers toward teaching in urban schools. For seven of the urban field experience participants, however, ratings of interest in urban teaching decreased over the course of the field experience.

Perceptions of Teaching Difficulty

Figure 1 presents pre-service teachers’ ratings of the extent to which they perceived that certain problems are encountered in inner-city schools (Figure 1a) and suburban schools (Figure 1b) prior to and following the field experience. By comparing the two figures, it is clear that overall these students perceived urban schools as generally more “problematic” than suburban schools both prior to and following the field experience.

Impact of the Urban Field Experience

Questionnaire responses suggest that the inner-city experience had an overall positive effect on attitudes toward urban schools. Significant differences between the two field experience groups (*i.e.*, inner city vs. suburban) were maintained at the post-practicum level for the perceptions of teaching difficulty scores for urban schools. [F_{pre} (df=1, 174)=8.23; F_{post} (df=1, 173)=4.02] (see Figure 2). Thus, exposure to urban classrooms did not appear to negatively impact prospective teachers’ perceptions of the problems encountered there and, as shown in Figure 1, improved perceptions in certain areas as indicated by a drop in the teaching difficulty ratings from pre to post, for the areas of motivation, discipline, language

Figure 1
Teaching Problem Ratings

Figure 1a. Mean Problem Ratings for Inner City Schools

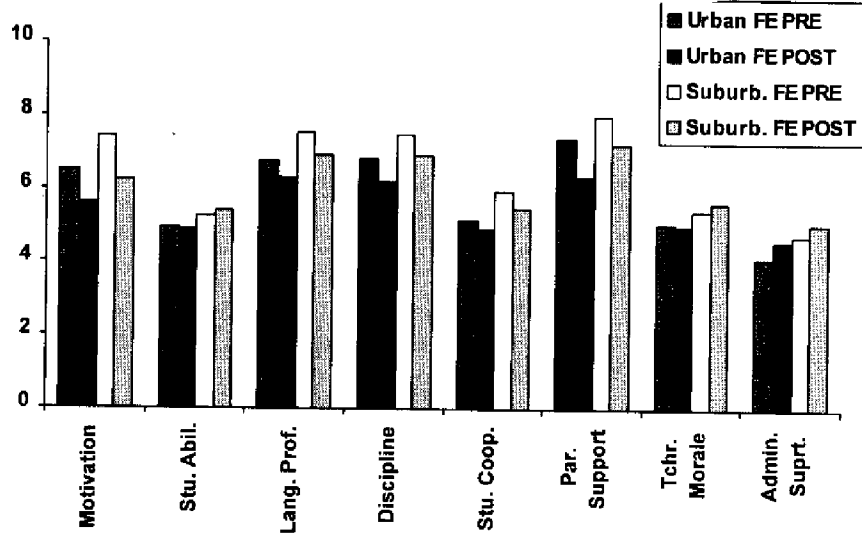
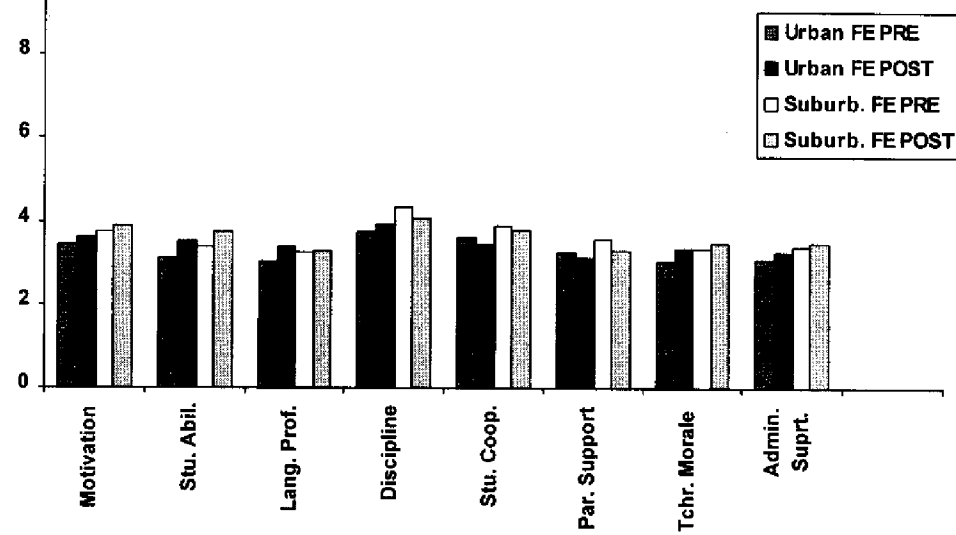
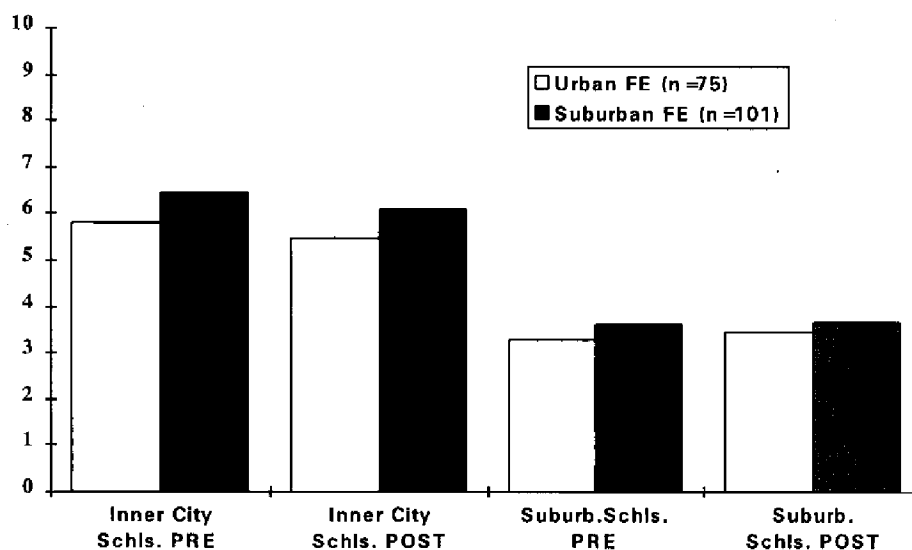


Figure 1b. Mean Problem Ratings for Suburban Schools



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Figure 2
Perception of Teaching Difficulty Ratings



proficiency, and parental support.

Rating scale responses indicate that the urban field experience group believed they gained more knowledge than did the suburban field experience group about students from different cultural backgrounds from their methods courses (which included instruction about multicultural education), (urban field experience $X=2.80$; suburban field experience $X=2.51$, $p \leq .01$) and from the field experience (urban field experience $X=3.51$; suburban field experience $X=2.30$, $p \leq .001$).

The urban group also rated on a ten-point scale the overall quality of instruction by the cooperating teacher in their field placement to be lower than did the suburban group (urban field experience $X=7.44$; suburban field experience $X=8.39$, $p \leq .01$).

Discussion

How can we account for the apparent differences between the results of this study and others (*e.g.*, Haberman & Post, 1992)? Is there something about the nature of the intervention, in this case the field experience, that could bring about differing results and, therefore, lead to differing conclusions about the value of urban field experiences in preparing teachers? What type of field experience did the pre-service teachers in this study receive and what characteristics of this experience account for their enhanced interest in urban teaching and their more positive disposition toward

urban schools?

Several elements distinguish the field experience described here from other field experiences examined in other studies. The overall *structure and content* of the field experience and its relation to other elements of the teacher preparation curriculum, the *duration of teaching responsibility* of the field experience students, and the extent of the *supervision* they received are key here. These may represent important factors which enabled the pre-service teachers in this study to benefit from their experience and to develop more positive attitudes concerning their effectiveness with the pupils they encountered in urban classrooms.

Structure

The urban field experience was integrated with a teaching methods course focusing primarily on social studies and language arts, and the activities that the field experience participants engaged in were connected to the curriculum of the field experience classroom. For example, the theme or topic for the “mini-unit” was generated in conjunction with the cooperating teacher and was aligned with subject matter being covered in the classroom. The field experience students were encouraged, however, to employ learner-centered teaching strategies presented in their methods classes, such as inquiry-based instruction, learning centers, and cooperative learning. In this manner, the content of the field experience was derived jointly from ideas about curriculum from university coursework and the specific context of the field placement classroom.

The field experience also followed several courses in which issues related to student diversity were addressed. It is, therefore, not surprising that the urban field experience enhanced the acquisition of knowledge of cultural diversity. As a result of their experiences in the field setting, those in the urban group were able to develop a “schema” for multicultural concepts. Learning about the theory and practice of multicultural education in the university classroom combined with the urban field experience made the information about culture and ethnicity and its implications for teaching more meaningful for the urban group.

Duration of Teaching Responsibility

Pre-service teachers completing the field experience in this study were required to spend a minimum of 96 hours, two full days a week, over an eight-week period in their field placement, a large part of which was spent actively engaged in teaching. As a result, they learned enough about their students to discover effective ways of carrying out instruction, and had the opportunity to overcome the initial frustrations and unsuccessful efforts that many pre-service teachers encounter. By contrast, in the study reported by Haberman and Post (1992) of a relatively small group of college sophomores (n=23), the field experience group only participated for a period of six weeks in a summer school program during which they had limited responsibility for actual classroom teaching. The sustained teaching experience

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afforded to those in the present study very likely contributed to their more positive attitudes toward the students and schools they encountered during the field experience.

Supervision

The role of the university supervisor with undergraduates who have limited experience in culturally diverse settings is also relevant. All field experience participants in this study regularly met individually and in groups with their field experience supervisor. In most cases, the supervisor was one of the social studies or language arts methods course instructors who was able to link methods course content with the field experience activities. All field experience students were observed teaching in their field experience placement classroom by the supervisor on two or more occasions. Individual conferences accompanied each observation where concerns about teaching and learning, the content and structure of the lesson and unit, the individual and group needs of the pupils, and any other issues that arose could be discussed. Through continuous contact between the field experience student and the supervisor, support for innovative teaching practices that were consistent with student needs could be maintained, and the tendency to adopt the "conservative routines" referred to by Jesse Goodman (1985) and others (Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1984) could be avoided.

Unfortunately, in some cases field experience students were placed in classrooms where the cooperating teacher was experiencing difficulties with the class (serious discipline problems, low student motivation) or was not providing the class with optimal learning opportunities (numerous worksheets, long periods of uninterrupted seatwork, few opportunities for student collaboration or active learning). It is worth noting that, at least for the participants in this study, a negative view of the cooperating teacher's methods did not necessarily imply that the field experience dampened pre-service teachers' enthusiasm for pursuing inner city teaching. Recall that the urban field experience group rated their cooperating teachers significantly lower than their suburban counterparts while their interest in urban teaching was higher and inner city teaching difficulty ratings were lower than those of the suburban group. This finding is consistent with Malone's (1985) assertion that pre-service teachers feel they can improve upon the teaching of those who preceded them in urban schools.

Diminished Enthusiasm: When the Field Experience Malfunctions

What of the seven members of the urban field experience group who indicated that they were less inclined following the field experience to pursue inner-city teaching than they had been at the start? While this represents a small proportion of the sample, it is noteworthy that the inner-city field experience apparently weakened their interest in urban teaching. Separate analyses were conducted of the teaching difficulty ratings and other questionnaire items for the seven urban

students who indicated that their interest in urban teaching had decreased. Their overall ratings of problems in inner-city schools increased from pre- to post-field experience while both the total urban group and suburban groups' ratings decreased. While the small number of subjects does not allow for statistical comparisons, this finding does appear to be an important trend in the data and worthy of further study. Excerpts from these students' written responses to the field-experience suggest that they were overwhelmed by the poor material conditions they encountered in the schools. As one student expressed it, "I felt it was difficult to maintain a positive attitude throughout the experience due to the many obstacles encountered by lack of materials, source books, disruptive student behavior, etc." Several others cited problems with classroom control that they were unable to overcome. In some cases, they felt that the cooperating teacher was unable to successfully manage the classroom and, as a result, neither were they. Perhaps pre-service teachers such as these would have benefited from closer and more effective supervision.

Improving the Urban Field Experience

While the field experience examined in this study yielded positive effects, still more can be done to improve school-based experiences in urban settings. The interpretation above suggests that teacher preparation programs should include specific, structured activities aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of cultural diversity within the context of the communities where students carry out their field work "to sensitize teachers to values, lifestyles, and cultures different from their own and generate a respect for human diversity" (Zeichner, 1990; p. 118). It is also crucial that effective cooperating teachers in urban schools be identified to work with prospective teachers. As suggested here, although a university supervisor can sometimes attenuate the impact of a weak cooperating teacher, the influence of an exemplary model classroom teacher is invaluable.

Overall, this study supports the general value of field experiences in teacher preparation and, in particular, within urban settings. The debate surrounding their content and purpose will no doubt continue, but rather than dismissing the impact of field experiences on the formation of positive attitudes toward urban schools and students, it would seem more worthwhile for future research to examine the nature of those experiences to determine their value. Through such further investigations into the processes that underlie the influence of field experience, teacher educators can begin to gain insight into how to structure field-based educational programs as well as knowledge of what to expect from those experiences.

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