"I Thought I Was Prepared!" Meeting the Challenges of Diversity in High-Need, High-Potential Schools

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“I THOUGHT I WAS PREPARED!” MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY IN HIGH-NEED/HIGH-POTENTIAL SCHOOLS

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Abstract
This article reports descriptive findings of a qualitative investigation of early-career teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach diverse learners in high-need/high-potential urban schools. Interviews revealed that new teachers’ insights into their teacher preparation programs and the challenging expectations involved in teaching diverse learners. When these early-career teachers took on their first jobs, they thought they were prepared, but found out that they were not quite ready for what they encountered. Several said they were in for a “culture shock.” Teachers also provided suggestions regarding how teacher education programs can better prepare prospective teachers to meet the host of challenges awaiting them in today’s diverse classrooms.

Current demographic statistics reveal that the minority student enrollment at the elementary and secondary school levels has reached 42% of the school population. The percentage of minority enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools has grown from 34% in 1993 to 42.1% in 2004 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004-2005). According to scholars, the minority enrollment will begin to approach 50% in the near future (Meacham, McClellan, Pearse, & Greene, 2003; Pluviose, 2006; Schultz, 2001). The United
States is a diverse country in terms of cultural, ethnical, racial, linguistic, and socio-economical components (Bruns & Corso, 2001). It is a nation built from the richness of many cultures, languages, traditions and beliefs, thus the need to understand diversity in education settings is critical. Diversity is present in every aspect of our lives, and it is perhaps most evident in our classrooms (Valentiin, 2006).

As evidenced by Cushner and Trifonovitch (1989), teacher educators have been responding to this reality for several decades in many ways. However, the debate continues about whether or not teacher education programs are adequately preparing future teachers to meet the challenges of teaching diverse learners and about what direction teacher education programs should take (e.g., Klug, Luckey, Wilkins, & Whitfield, 2006; Mark & Hicks-Townes, 2006; Mason, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 1997; Schultz, 2001; Sleeter, 2008). In any case, the primary goal of teacher education is to prepare prospective teachers who can effectively teach students attending to students’ various backgrounds, different learning styles, diverse cultural orientations, and individual differences. Teacher educators must continue gaining insights into ways to better prepare teachers to understand and value student diversity.

Several studies related to student diversity have suggested strategies for teacher education programs. For example, Cushner and Trifonovitch (1989) examined ways to address the problems future teachers might face in connecting with students and the obstacles they might need to overcome in diverse settings. Mason (1999) recommended specific and structured activities aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. Ooka Pang (1995) also studied the various aspects of diversity and how they should be addressed in teacher education courses.
Importantly, teacher educators can prepare teacher candidates by communicating high
expectations for historically underserved groups, as well as educating them to critically examine
their expectations (Sleeter, 2008). In addition to courses in multicultural education, preservice
teachers should also have opportunities to interact with students from diverse backgrounds
during their field experiences and student teaching placements. These clinical experiences should
continue to be examined, redesigned and enhanced to further determine whether they are truly
diverse, and provide a realistic picture of their teaching experiences and teaching contexts
(Valentiin, 2006). Authors (2005) collaborated with early career teachers and designed training
modules for preservice teachers that teach strategies for communicating support for diverse
learners and planning and implementing multi-level instruction that meets the learning needs of
the diverse learners found in today’s classrooms. Descriptive data for the current research was an
outgrowth of the development and implementation of the above-described modules.

Tomlinson (2003) pointed out that today’s students vary in important ways and asserted
that teachers need to know this variance among students and consistently teach with that in mind.
She suggested that teachers employ “differentiated teaching” as an approach to addressing
diversity. She explained that teachers engage in differentiated teaching when they “proactively
plan varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and/or how they
can express what they have learned in order to increase to likelihood that each student will learn
as much as he or she can as efficiently as possible” (p. 151). Differentiated instruction is based
on beliefs about differences among learners, how students learn, differences in learning
preferences, and individual interests. As such, the basic premise is that that the purpose of
schools should be to maximize the capabilities and diversities of all students (Anderson, 2007).
Tomlinson saw differentiated teaching as a “responsive teaching” approach rather than a “one-
Once Tomlinson established differentiated teaching as “a way of thinking about teaching and learning that, over time, pervades everything a teacher does” (p. 151), she suggested four elements of classrooms that need to be understood: who we teach, where we teach, what we teach, and how we teach (p. 156). These four elements include points of focus that serve as a lens through which preservice educators might explore the characteristics of teachers in high-need/high-potential schools. Thus, these interdependent classroom elements functioned as a conceptual framework for the current study.

This qualitative study explored the authentic perspectives of early-career teachers through video taped narratives that describe the new teachers’ experiences in meeting the challenges of teaching learners with diverse needs in various educational contexts. By asking new teachers what they encountered in some of their first classrooms, this descriptive research offers first-hand observations about challenges, preparation, and professional growth. The findings that emerged from this study may assist prospective teachers as well as teacher educators in reflecting on ways in which beginning teachers work to meet the needs of their diverse learners. All too often, early-career teachers are not ready for what they encounter in the classroom.

**Methodology**

The current study paints a descriptive picture grounded in the voice of early-career teachers. This type of research enables teacher educators to better understand this educational experience from new teachers’ perspectives. The objective of this study was to provide insights
into ways to better prepare prospective teachers to work effectively with diverse students, appreciate and value various cultural backgrounds, especially in urban school settings. To address the objective, the research question was framed as “how prepared were the teachers in their teacher education programs to meet the needs of their students?” Open-ended interviews served as a helpful way to get at these experiences and facilitated the generation of data that reveal genuine, original insights (Silverman, 1993). The following interview questions guided the interviews:

- When you think of “diversity” in your teaching career, what specifically comes to mind?
- When you walked in … what was your biggest surprise, how did reality match what you expected?
- Were any of the problems addressed in your teacher education program?
- Describe your learners.
- Describe any challenges you have experiences in establishing a classroom community?
- Tell us about specific examples.
- Have there been times where you have felt pulled in several directions in terms of what, you, as a teacher, are expected to do? Can you describe any particular incidents?
- When you are deciding what to teach and how to teach your students, what kinds of things guide your decisions?

Participants

Through “purposeful sampling” (Creswell, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008), seven practicing teachers from two large school districts in Illinois participated as interviewees for this study. All seven teachers were full-time educators in their first 5 years of teaching in high-need/high-potential urban school settings. All of them were
women and they ranged in age from 24 to 35. Out of seven teachers, five were European Americans and two were African Americans. The interviewees’ length of teaching experience spanned from 1 to 4 years. Four teachers, all European Americans, taught at the elementary school level; one of them was a special education teacher. Two teachers, both African Americans, taught at the middle school level; one teacher was a Language Arts teacher and the other was a Reading Specialist. One teacher, European American, taught English at the secondary school level. The interviewees chose to work in their respective school sites because of job availability, student teaching experiences, interview opportunities, or proximity to their homes.

At the beginning of the research project, the research team developed and conducted a needs assessment survey of early career teachers in high needs/high potential schools to assess their needs. For the purpose of this study, high-need/high-potential schools were defined as schools with 50% of enrolled students receiving free or reduced lunches, at least a 15% teacher turnover rate, or 34% of the teachers teaching out of their certification area. Schools that met the criteria in urban school districts in Illinois were contacted and two districts agreed to participate in the study.

Based on needs assessment survey results and information gathered through focus groups, we decided to collaborate with early career teachers related to teaching students with diverse learning needs. As a professional development team from a teacher education program helping preservice and early career teachers reach and teach diverse learners, we asked the selected early career teachers if they would agree to collaborate with us on the project and if they would participate in an interview related to their experiences in teaching students with diverse backgrounds and needs. To control for the variations across the teacher education programs, we recruited graduates only from one large sized public university, located in Central Illinois, with
the student enrollment of 21,000. From a pool of interested teachers, the interviewees were selected as representatives of early career teachers in two big urban school districts in Illinois. These teachers later joined the research team as teacher-collaborators in the development of instructional modules. Before recruiting the participants, the researchers gained approval for this project from the necessary district and school administrators and the Institutional Review Board.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from interviews with early-career teachers in high-need/high-potential urban schools. Individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions related to expectations, support, surprises, challenges, preparations, and particular examples from classroom experiences were conducted following appropriate relational rapport building and observations of the participants’ instructional sessions. Each interview was videotaped and transcribed verbatim. The initial broad, open-ended questions served as an interview guide with the interviewer asking follow-up questions as needed for further elaboration and clarification. Researchers derived the questions from classroom observations and from results of the needs assessment survey that had been previously administered to these interviewees and 69 other teachers in the participating school districts.

Data were collected from multiple sources including extant literature, memos, field notes, administrator responses, multiple meetings and observation, and site visits. The administrator was the principal of the elementary school where one of the teachers worked. The principal’s responses were utilized to cross-check the teachers’ descriptions of the teachers’ early teaching experiences. To ensure data reliability, the research team followed the guidelines and procedures provided by Marshall and Rossman (1995). Through cross checking sources, this research sought to ensure the reliability of the data analysis as well as the interpretation.
Data Analysis

Conventional procedures for analyzing qualitative data such as interview transcripts were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Twycross & Shields, 2008). The transcribed interviews served as the basis for analysis of the early career teachers’ narratives. Further, a “constant comparative” approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to generate thematic patterns that emerged from these descriptive data were used to compare with other examples for similarities and differences (Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008). Thematic data analysis involved classifying patterns and assigning portions of the data to specific categories informed by Tomlinson’s (2003) conceptual framework and continual comparisons within and across the groupings (Lindlof, 1995). The researchers then reread the transcripts several times, listing the emerging themes and multiple coders in the research team compared analysis notes of the same data to garner a degree of consistency and corroboration (Twycross & Shields, 2008). The themes that emerged from the data reflected responses across interviewees and provided a measure of descriptive scope. To highlight the importance of the themes, significant and live quotations of teachers are presented in this study.

Findings

To support the overall argument concerning teachers’ lack of preparation for diverse schools, this study’s findings are reported in four categories, which correspond to the four elements (i.e., who, where, what, and how) that guided this research (Tomlinson, 2003). Four categories in which the beginning teachers struggle to meet the needs of their diverse learners include: 1) students; 2) school context; 3) instructional practices; and 4) challenges in their first years of teaching.

Through this study, many positive feelings about their students and their families became
evident in these beginning teachers. They passionately expressed their joys, excitement, and delights about teaching their students. All teachers in the study expressed deep commitment toward making differences at their respective school sites. For the purpose of this study, the focus was on the issues that teachers made about teaching or about their teacher education programs. However, these comments should not be misconstrued as the only comments that they have made. None of the teachers we interviewed was ready to give up on teaching; they were simply looking for suggestions and support during the early years of their teaching careers.

Their Students

Interviewees described their students’ lives both in and out of school. The participants made numerous positive comments about their students and families; however, there still were several areas where they needed support. The interviewees mentioned their feelings of unpreparedness to face students’ lack of aspiration, language barriers, behavioral challenges, lack of support and health care at home, and social problems as challenges they face in teaching their students. In the following, selected quotes are presented that capture the range of teachers’ responses and present an overall picture of the circumstances these teachers and their students experienced in their high-need/high-potential schools.

A first grade teacher, who taught at a school that had ninety-eight percent of the student body with free or reduced lunch, commented on the students’ lack of aspiration:

... and it’s hard to explain to my kids, ‘if you do well, you go on—you can go to middle school and you go to high school, and if you go to college, you can have a job ... and it’s completely foreign to them. They’ll say, ‘I don’t want to go to high school.’ They don’t
have high aspirations and the only environment is this place they are living in: our housing development. My kids have not been outside of this. My kids, if I ask them, “Where do you live, they’re not going to say [name of city], but [name of housing project]. This is their world. There’s something outside this housing project, but they don’t aspire to it. It’s very scary when a first grader says, ‘I can’t wait to have a baby.’ . . . because they want someone to take care of; they think that’s what they’re supposed to do because that’s what their moms did. There’s very little aspiration for anything beyond what they see.

An elementary school teacher who taught at a school located near the housing project expressed her feelings of unpreparedness for language barriers as:

I had a child who didn’t know the name of a toaster. He called it a ‘bread popper’ (which I think is pretty good—he developed the name for something). But no one in his home said ‘toaster’ to him. It’s just incredible what these children don’t know . . . It’s hard for me to even comprehend how you don’t know the name of it—what even a toaster is.

A middle school Language Arts teacher stated, she faced behavioral challenges when students were “fighting, screaming, yelling at me, bring matches, bringing knives to school.” She continued to say, “They come in angry.” An elementary teacher noted that “they’re trying to kill each other; I feel like I’m putting out fires every day.”

In relation to the lack of support and health care at home, an elementary school teacher mentioned that “He goes home and it’s pretty clear that no one cares. A lot of students say they don’t want to go home.” Another 3rd grade elementary school teacher mentioned:

I have children in my class who have psychological disorders. And I have not had any
classes at . . . [the university]. Basically, I didn’t know how to deal with it. One of the children was schizophrenic, with bipolar disorder—and he has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and I had never had training in all of this, so when he started acting out—his mother hadn’t told me about it—when he started acting out, she still was not honest with me, so I didn’t know what to do. So I found books in the library…

. . . about 2 weeks in school, at the end of the day, he had a sudden outburst—started screaming—his body was shaking he was throwing furniture—he had no control and was screaming. I thought it was a seizure. Afterwards, he had no idea anything had happened and he didn’t recall anything. By then, other students were panicking—they had scattered all over the different parts of the room- and it’s been repeated like that… You also have to learn how to deal with parents—like—how can I approach the parents and tell them, ‘Your child had an outburst today—extremely violent.’ I never had a course on confronting a parent, but now I know I do. But I didn’t know how to deal with students after 2 weeks of teaching.

An elementary school teacher with a class of one hundred percent minority enrollment commented:

At first . . . what was important to me was that they didn’t bring their homework, but for the kids, they hadn’t had breakfast, lunch, or dinner since the last time they were in school . . . It’s Monday morning and they’re starving—they’re chewing pencils.
In relation to social conflicts, high school English teacher mentioned:

... a girl constantly had marks on her body, step dad and her mother and ... family members were living in a one-bedroom house and she was beaten at home. I had to decide whether to report it [to the Department of Children and Family Services].

A middle school Language Arts teacher mentioned, “You’re trying to teach them the parts of speech, differences between pronouns and verbs while you figure out when they were going through all those different issues.” An elementary school teacher commented,

But you have to remember where they’re coming from—Maybe their mom is out all night doing other things, they don’t have heat at home or—you know—five people sleep in one bedroom—kids come in to school and they smell like urine—they don’t get proper bathing and showers, so they smell.

School Context

All the schools in which the interviewees taught are located in communities with high proportions (90-98%) of low-income residents. The schools include a predominant population of African American and Hispanic families (77-100%). Safety was a grave concern to most of the teachers. Issues of drug abuse and high crime rates concerned the teachers to the point where they made their students leave for home in groups or with older siblings if they had them. The teachers reported little parental involvement and support and said that many of their students came from single-parent families. One elementary school teacher felt particularly unprepared.
She described her first days in her school, saying, “I literally had nothing when I started the job; there was nothing except the lesson plans I had made in college. . . .” Another elementary teacher described her surroundings:

> It was kind of scary. Smoke was coming out of the ground. Big huge buildings with cracked windows . . . Garbage cans on fire . . . dead mice falling . . . windows were open, bugs and things coming in . . . it was very noisy. It was so whelming. I didn’t know what to do. You know—all that stuff that you have to learn in the situation. I don’t know whether it happens in every public school—you know, I work in a lower income area.

A middle school teacher reported that some of her students’ parents were drug users, that more than half of her students lived with their grandparents, and that her 7th and 8th grade boys were consistently recruited to gangs. This teacher was shocked to learn that middle school-age female students were sexually active and that so many became pregnant. A high school teacher commented that the pregnancy rate of the girls in her school was surprisingly high, that there was a high rate of gang activity in her school, and that violence was prevalent. In the same school, this teacher started with 16 senior students at the beginning of the school year and by March, she had only five. This teacher reported that 11 students had either dropped out of school or transferred to other schools.

In this study, most of the interviewees themselves had been raised and educated in suburban, monocultural schools within their own neighborhoods and that they had experienced high levels of parental support. Only one teacher with a minority background said that she had been raised in government-subsidized housing and had attended a neighborhood school. Most of
the teachers had attended schools where they had “homework on a regular basis.” All the
teachers’ parents were involved in their education and instilled in them an appreciation of
morality. For example, one elementary school teacher commented that she had been raised to
“respect others.” A high school English teacher reported that in the school she attended as a child
she and her peers could “read novels on their own and come back and discuss them.” This
teacher conveyed her concern that she could not expect the same level of academic output from
her current students since “only 2 out of [her] 20 students could read.”

*Instructional Practices*

Meeting the individual needs of students, acknowledging individual learning styles, and
adapting lesson plans for special education students were the issues that teachers mentioned most
often when they were asked how they meet the needs of their diverse learners. As one high
school teacher who had taught for 4 years put it, “I haven’t had a hard time with learning
standards . . . it’s not too tough . . . the standards are broad enough you can play with them. You
can integrate activities with the same dry components . . .” In trying to address state learning
standards, a middle school teacher noted,

The standards are put forth so we have all some consistent guidelines about what
constitutes the major subjects and what sub skills should be taught—at different levels.
For instance, reading for understanding—that’s one of the standards—of course, you
want to teach reading for understanding. But you can teach it through magazines,
newspapers, you can use the science book even the math book—you know—just teach
the content areas, but you can teach with the standards as a goal and you can be
successful. I think the curriculum is important because it provides consistency across
grade levels and schools, and across cities throughout the state.

Nonetheless, many teachers in this study saw attempts to achieve the state learning standards as a challenging endeavor, considering the readiness levels of their students. In their opinion, helping all students achieve the same level of state learning standards was their greatest difficulty. These teachers had encountered students who had very little prior knowledge and experience on which these teachers could build and little to no parental support. One teacher expressed one facet of the challenges she faced as she attempted to address state learning standards this way: “the diversity in the room is enormous . . .” An elementary teacher explained that “not everyone is ready for the standards. I have very few students at grade level and there are first grade students who can’t even write their names . . . far below grade level . . .” A third grade teacher commented, “80% are not reading at their grade level . . .”

One of the elementary teachers from a Title I school expressed her concern and frustration related to teachers’ accountability for addressing the same learning standards as teachers who taught in wealthier schools that were not considered at risk:

It’s really hard for us to up to live up to the same standards as other schools because we don’t have parental support and our students aren’t even exposed to books. This year, at the end of this year, my students will struggle to write even one sentence. I talk to teachers from other schools in other district and their kids are writing wonderful stories. My kids don’t have the vocabulary; they’ve never been exposed to that, and have no desire to write. Writing is a punishment to my children. Even getting a pencil to copy from the board is stressful to a lot of my kids. For a lot of students, even having a pencil
in their hands is just a freak-out. The difference between my kids being able to actually sit down and write and these children from other schools where they have great parental supports, where there are computers at home, and they have the vocabulary. And it’s amazing to see the differences. It’s very hard for me to get the same level of learning standards but I feel I have to do that. We are all judged by test scores. We do a wonderful job with what we are given, but when we see other students from other schools, I don’t think we are going to test as well on the whole. . . . These kids just struggle a lot because they’ve never had that prior experience.

Challenges in the Beginning Years

Each interviewee conveyed feelings of frustration and described challenges she experienced during her first years of teaching. A teacher in her fourth year of teaching said, “It gets hectic, and I get frustrated. I was exhausted at the end of the day every day. When people see me teaching they say, ‘I don’t know how you do that.’” Another teacher, also in her fourth year of teaching, described her first year of teaching: “I went home crying hysterically. I was going insane. Inside I was going crazy.”

As we analyzed the data, we paid attention to in-vivo codes as Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested. While the teachers made several positive references to their schools and educational leaders, some of their language choices such as “depression,” “burnout,” “didn’t know what to do,” “overwhelming,” “frustration,” “crying,” “crazy,” “tiresome and “hectic” depicted these teachers’ challenges. The teachers’ choice of words also suggested that teacher educators need to consider the possibility of teacher burn-out and attrition rates. An elementary school teacher mentioned, “In my first year of teaching, I did not know how to deal with it. So in lessons – I
suddenly started screaming—. . .” Another elementary school teacher said, “I got depressed for a while.” A high school teacher expressed: “I am spending a lot of my time on things that I didn’t think were part of teachers’ roles... my first year in teaching was really hard.” To an elementary teacher in her fourth year of teaching, her first year of teaching was filled with many surprises: “My biggest surprise would have to be everything. As far as teachers’ responsibility goes – it’s amazing and overwhelming.” Another elementary school teacher commented, “You know, the first few weeks, I was so overwhelmed and intimidated. I went home crying a lot. I needed to adjust to my students’ behavior — this was a major adjustment.”

Discussion

Interviews with the early-career teacher participants revealed that teaching was their passion. This research project and interview protocol focused on how well or ill-prepared these teachers felt as they entered the teaching profession. The interview structure encouraged them to share their deepest concerns about their teacher preparation in areas of understanding and appreciating learners’ diversity. The findings revealed what surprised these teachers about their insecurities as they began teaching in high-need/high-potential schools.

Although this study’s interviewees did not express a lack of tolerance or sympathy toward their students, specific attention was given to the fact that without proper preparation before beginning teaching assignments in high-need schools, the amount of pressure and the work load can be challenging to most beginning teachers. Many new teachers experience "classroom or reality shock" and often misunderstand their feelings of uneasiness as an indication that they have entered a wrong profession (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Cushner and Trifonovitch (1989) recommended at least a 2-year adjustment period for new teachers, according to individual teacher characteristics and specific circumstances. Some of the
interviewees in our study also revealed that it took a while for them to adjust to their challenges. A middle school level teacher said “it gets better… then we take time, we grow and recheck… as it goes along. I think it takes a while because you move around the grade levels and in some cases it just is an adjustment period… it can be very tiresome.” For an elementary teacher, “there were definite times when I was overwhelmed and I am currently feeling quite overwhelmed.” This teacher commented that her experience became a lot more positive during her second year of teaching.

Nationwide, approximately 30% of new teachers are choosing to leave the profession within 5 years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2003, 1999). In disadvantaged and more diverse educational settings with lack of administrative and peer support, more teachers decide to leave the profession early in their career (Fullan, 2001; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Kelley, 2004; Kopkowski, 2008; Wayne, Youngs, & Fleischman, 2005). The teachers in this study sought support from their administrators, mentor teachers, or colleagues when they were encountering challenges during their first years and mentioned that their help played a great role throughout the adjustment period. A few teachers, however, indicated that not much support was available from people around them. An elementary school teacher mentioned, “I don’t know whether I felt supported throughout the whole school year or even by administration. I did not feel that I was supported by administration…..”

“Trial and error” was a term used by three of the teachers as they mentioned the many important lessons that they had learned. Teachers reported that when they were in their teacher education programs they learned to make rules and follow them, and that they were trained to address learning standards. However, one special education teacher who said she was still quite overwhelmed by her work in her second year teaching said that she had not been informed
during her teacher education program about all the paper work involved in holding down teaching positions. An elementary teacher mentioned that the lesson planning format she had learned to use during her college years was too descriptive, impractical, and not focused on reality.

Based on the findings of this study, teachers were feeling quite ill-prepared for the diversity issues they encounter in educational settings (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Throughout the interviews, the teachers in the study shared ideas about what might have helped them as they prepared for their teaching careers. Following are representative areas in which teachers mentioned concepts or skills that they had not learned during their teacher education programs, or that they know they were taught but did not realize their importance or implications until they got into their own classrooms. According to the interviewees, teacher education programs could have better prepared them in the following areas:

- Behavior problems of students
- Diversity and different student level — diversity meant only different nationalities
- One-to-one real experience with diverse issues
- Communication skills (conference, sometimes confrontation) on how to speak with parents from various cultures or backgrounds
- Real experiences of diversity
- Teaching students with severe disabilities or behavior disorders
- Test-taking skills for students
- Relating lessons outside of school and their students’ life experiences
- Direct language instruction
- Giving students feedback on their academic progress
Extra work required of teachers (e.g., paper work, phone calls, after-school work)

Information about teachers’ unions

The objective of the current study was to provide insights into ways to better prepare prospective teachers to work effectively with diverse populations of students. Through this qualitative investigation, findings suggest that the early-career teachers started their teaching careers with an expectation that they were ready for teaching diverse learners in high-need/high-potential urban schools, but found out once they started teaching that they were not prepared for what they encountered. Several said they experienced a “culture shock.” Given that the role of teacher education programs is to prepare future teachers to be as successful as possible in fulfilling their assigned tasks and to capably carry out their responsibilities (Cushner & Trifonovitch, 1989), this study’s findings should raise teacher educators’ awareness of how barriers and obstacles in the first years in teaching may affect early career teachers’ ability to teach others.

The schools in which the interviewees taught were located in communities with high proportions of low-income residents, and the students’ behavioral problems, social problems, lack of care and support at home, health care problems, language barriers, and lack of aspiration were huge challenges for these early career teachers. Most of the teacher interviewees stated that they experienced difficulties in meeting the individual needs of students, acknowledging individual learning styles, adapting lesson plans for special education students, achieving state learning standards for different levels of students, addressing the accountability issues, and communicating effectively with parents and students. According to the interviewees, these were the areas in which they felt their teacher education programs did not adequately prepare them. These authentic perspectives of early-career teachers in meeting the challenges of teaching
learners with diverse needs contribute useful insights to the extant body of research on meeting
the needs of diverse students and families (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005).

Challenging conditions are, indeed, a way of life for teachers. The demands of teaching
diverse learners, collaborating with colleagues, administrators, and families, differentiating
instructions, managing classrooms and children’s behavior, and extensive workloads may be
overwhelming. While teacher education programs strive to prepare teacher candidates to
demonstrate the ability to teach effectively and to deal with classroom challenges, it is virtually
impossible to exclude the possibility that any teacher, no matter how well-prepared, may “cave”
under the demanding circumstances and pressures they encounter in school settings. Teachers
who work under challenging and demanding work conditions often experience helplessness,
depression, and loss of enthusiasm that are indicators of teacher burnout.

Teacher burnout adversely affects teachers’ job adjustment, teaching quality, and student
achievement, sometimes leading to career changes based on teachers’ inability to deal with their
assigned responsibilities as part of the teaching force. Farber and Miller (as cited in Byrne, 1994)
warned us about teacher burn-out: “teachers who fall victim to burn-out are likely to be less
sympathetic toward students, have a lower tolerance for classroom disruption, be less apt to
prepare adequately for class, and feel less committed and dedicated to their work” (p. 646). The
ability of future teachers, as well as practicing teachers, to effectively teach students in diverse
settings under challenging conditions is critical to success in the education process. A review of
the literature beginning in 1975 indeed found little research published relative to beginning
teachers’ challenges with their preparation programs, and even less specifically related to their
challenges with preparedness in teaching students with special needs and other diverse needs
(D’Aniello, 2008).
To prepare students who are informed, supported, and prepared as they enter the teaching profession with the ability to teach effectively and to sustain lifelong careers, the early provision of professional development opportunities, informational sessions, field-based practice applications, and active support systems is critical. However, traditional teacher education programs frequently have not given sufficient attention to preparing students for real teaching contexts and have not worked collaboratively with schools to continue professional development related to reaching and teaching diverse learners (Klug, Luckey, Wilkins, & Whitfield, 2006; Mark & Hicks-Townes, 2006). As Kopkowsi (2008) pointed and as the interviewees in this study indicated, new teachers often encounter an isolated, quite different system from the collaborative school context or student teaching environment they just experienced. Providing future teachers with resources, supports, and professional development early and continuously in order to prepare them for the diverse educational settings in which they will work may make them more prepared and better-adjusted beginning teachers.

Elmore’s and Burney’s (1998) principles of successful professional development suggest focusing on concrete classroom applications of general ideas, exposing teachers to actual practice rather than descriptions, providing opportunities for group support and collaboration, and involving evaluation and feedback by skilled practitioners might be adapted within teacher education curricula with the goal of making a difference in the lives of beginning and continuing teachers and their students. Possible approach for improvement could be increased clinical experiences for a longer duration, provision of a full year of support for new teachers, and increased knowledge and skills needed to address the unique needs of the diverse learners (D’Aniello, 2008). It would be helpful if teacher education programs use inquiry approaches in which teacher candidates are guided in reflecting and learning in the field, linking field-based
learning with professional understanding, and learning to think through real-world teaching situations (Sleeter, 2008). People often lack the foundation for the problems they will face (Cushner & Trifonovitch, 1989), and the similar case happens to many beginning teachers. It would be also helpful if teacher education programs include specific, structured activities aimed at increasing awareness and understanding the diversity within the context of the educational settings based upon the systematic analysis of the recommendations that early career teachers make (Jung, 2010).

This study is not without limitations. A “purposeful sampling” method (Creswell, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Patton, 1990) was used in this study and 7 practicing teachers from two school districts in one state participated as interviewees. Therefore, the study participants are not a representative group of beginning teachers and the results of the study may not be similar across other school districts and regions. In addition, for the exploratory purposes, selective parts of interviews were used to provide a richer description on the data. Therefore, it is possible that the researchers have not adequately captured the most salient issues that needed to be addressed with the beginning teachers.

Through this investigation, the joys, struggles, and professional growth of early career teachers were explored. The findings would provide useful insights and information for teacher educators as they develop programs that prepare highly qualified teachers who have the skills and competencies needed in the diverse classrooms of the 21st century (Mannings, 1999). Future teachers need to attain skills, knowledge, and positive dispositions in diverse settings to provide a culturally sensitive learning environment for diverse students and families. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to attend to these critical issues through various means and use tools of assessment to educate and gauge student progress toward this end (Anast Seguin &
Ambrosio, 2002).

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