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# Urban-Focused and Community-Based Teacher Preparation

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# Urban-Focused and Community-Based Teacher Preparation

John R. Walcott

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## Abstract

Existing challenges in many urban schools have led to an increased emphasis on urban-focused teacher preparation. While this work can be demanding and complex, many Christian teacher education programs desire to engage in this work as part of their efforts to prepare their teacher candidates to teach all students and to promote more equitable educational opportunities in urban communities. In this article, the author reviews the literature on effective urban teacher preparation and then discusses the potential for collaboration with local schools and communities to support this work in Christian teacher education programs. The author argues that authentic engagement with urban schools and communities is necessary to provide teacher candidates with the understandings, frameworks, and experiences needed to flourish in their work and to develop meaningful relationships with students, families, and community members.

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**T**he narrative surrounding urban education in our country is often dominated by a focus on low student achievement, alarming graduation rates, a shortage of qualified teaching, and a lack of adequate resources (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Hollins, 2012; Howard, 2013; Kirp, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2007). While this uncritical emphasis on difficulties and challenges is incomplete and presents a monolithic view that ignores the complexity, strengths, assets, and beauty often found in urban schools and communities, the challenges are real and symptoms of the significant obstacles to educational excellence and

equity faced by many students in American society.

Educators and communities have responded to these challenges in a myriad of ways, and efforts to improve urban education have naturally included a focus on teachers and teacher preparation. Research has highlighted the significant impact of teacher quality on student learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Howard & Milner, 2014). In addition, evidence demonstrates the differential effects of teacher shortages and unqualified teachers. These impacts are experienced disproportionately by students of color and by students in low-achieving schools located in high-poverty communities (Zeichner, 2003). There also exists the legitimate concern about the growing demographic divide between teachers and students. While students in our schools are increasingly diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic background, the teaching force remains overwhelmingly white and female (Jupp, 2013; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 2003). The existing challenges in many urban schools and concerns about the effectiveness and preparedness of urban teachers have led to an increased focus on the qualities of successful teachers and the manner in which these teachers are prepared for work in urban schools.

This reality is significant for the work of teacher preparation programs in Christian colleges and universities for several reasons. First, many graduates of such programs become teachers in

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URBAN-FOCUSED AND COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHER PREPARATION

urban schools. Due to the existing shortage of teachers in some areas, graduates of teacher preparation programs often find job opportunities in urban schools. Furthermore, many teacher candidates actively pursue positions in urban schools in response to existing educational inequities. Their desire to actively confront societal and educational injustices leads them to seek opportunities to teach in traditionally underserved schools and communities. Whether graduates of Christian colleges or universities take positions in urban schools because of availability, a sense of call, or some combination of the two, Christian teacher preparation programs have the responsibility to prepare their teacher candidates to be successful in teaching all students and in all communities.

Secondly, responding to and confronting educational inequities is part of the calling to seek justice and proclaim God's kingdom in society. The realities in many urban schools and communities certainly highlight existing injustices in our society and in our educational systems. Overwhelming evidence related to racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps (Baker Fulgam, 2013; Rooks, 2017), school disciplinary practices that disproportionately target students of color along with students living in poverty or with disabilities (Hwang, 2018; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Noguera, 2003), gaps in educational funding (EdBuild, 2019), and the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt owed to traditionally marginalized and underserved student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2006a) demonstrate the extent of educational inequity that endures in our society. This injustice demands a response from those who desire to respond to the biblical call to seek justice. The Bible, over and over again, charges "its readers to act justly and to right injustice" (Wolterstorff, 2013, p. 70). This should be reflected in the mission of the teacher education programs at Christian colleges and universities. While discussing the purpose of Christian higher education, Wolterstorff (2004) noted "... that as we wind our way through this world and come across injustice, we meet a wounded God. Beneath and behind the injustice of this world are the tears of God" (p. 154). This informs and guides our work in Christian teacher preparation programs.

Part of the task of Christian teacher preparation programs is to equip our teacher candidates to reject current realities that marginalize vast segments of our society and deprive them of their educational rights, and "... to change the world by making it a place of human flourishing" (Joldersma, 2004, p. xix). Engaging with urban schools and communities is part of our obedience to the biblical call for justice in our world.

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There is a strong basis, then, for the involvement of Christian teacher preparation programs to embrace the task of preparing teachers for work in urban schools and communities. The challenge, however, exists in terms of how to do this well. Teacher preparation is complex and difficult work, and this is especially true of urban-focused teacher preparation. It demands a commitment and focus that is not present in all teacher preparation programs. Duncan-Andrade (2011) argued, "Not every program needs to commit to preparing teachers to work in urban schools, but for those that do, it should be their only focus" (p. 322). This assertion serves as a challenge to institutions that have not traditionally been involved in urban teacher preparation. Many Christian colleges and universities fall into this category, and therefore, it is essential that as we consider how to respond to the need for effective urban-focused teacher preparation in Christian teacher preparation programs, we take this challenge seriously and consider how to meet this demand effectively. Are programs that have not always been associated with urban schools able to effectively engage in this work? If so, how?

The goal of this article is to engage constructively with these questions and to offer a path forward that will contribute to the ability of Christian teacher preparation programs to appropriately equip their teacher candidates for work in urban schools. I begin by presenting a brief review of the characteristics of effective urban-focused teacher preparation. Then, building on this literature, I

argue that collaboration with local communities and strong partnerships with schools and communities provide an opportunity for teacher preparation programs in Christian colleges and universities to be effective in preparing teacher candidates for work in urban schools.

Furthermore, I contend that these collaborations not only provide an opportunity but also are essential and necessary components of urban-focused teacher preparation programs in Christian institutions of higher education.

## Urban-Focused Teacher Preparation

While school reform efforts are varied and multifaceted, there is general agreement that a focus on teacher preparation must be at the heart of efforts to improve outcomes for students in urban schools. As Milner (2012) strongly argued, “There is no issue more important to improving urban education—particularly the instructional practices of teachers in urban classrooms—than the preparation of teachers” (p. 700). Although urban-focused teacher preparation is a still developing field of literature (Howard & Milner, 2014), there is a growing body of research outlining its essential components. Research has emphasized the need for experiences that immerse candidates in urban communities, provide an intellectual framework for understanding students’ realities, critically engage with issues of justice and equity, and equip teachers to meet the needs of all learners. Furthermore, the design of the program must include a coherent vision of teaching and learning and the integration of course work with clinical experience.

First, then, teacher candidates need to be culturally immersed in urban communities (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2001; Noel, 2013; Sleeter, 2001) in order to confront negative stereotypes that often result from limited contact with urban communities (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Leitze, 2006). Effective programs have prioritized community-based projects, service learning, and personal interaction with urban communities in order to provide deeper, more authentic, and more realistic connections with and perspectives about urban communities (Massey &

Szente, 2007; Solomon, Manoukaian, & Clark, 2007). Such involvements have been demonstrated to positively impact teacher candidates’ attitudes toward issues of multiculturalism and difference (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Leitzek, 2006).

Second, teacher preparation programs need to provide candidates with a framework through which they can understand the experiences, cultural and linguistic background, strengths, and weaknesses of the students they will teach (Banks, 2016; Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Milner, 2006; Tidwell & Thompson, 2009; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Leitze, 2006). This foundational understanding is also necessary to confront the deficit narratives that teacher candidates have often encountered and internalized (Delpit, 2002; Hilliard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Pollack, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Candidates need to understand the multiple and complex identities of their students and the manner in which these impact their experiences and learning (Banks, 2016). “In its simplest conception, research has suggested that teachers need to build knowledge about and be aware of the racial and cultural background of students in order to address the needs students bring to school” (Howard & Milner, 2014, p. 206).

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Third, teacher candidates need opportunities to engage critically with issues of equity and justice. Critical theorists have argued that teacher candidates need to be able to engage actively in the struggle to transform society (Giroux, 2009; Giroux & McLaren, 1996; Kincheloe, 2004). In addition, they need to understand the ways that schools support dominant ideology and reproduce social inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Teacher education, therefore, must include a focus on preparing teacher

candidates who are independent thinkers and transformative intellectuals (Giroux & McLaren, 1996). Programs, therefore, should place cultural studies at the center in order to provide candidates with a framework necessary to interrogate school and classroom relations (Giroux, 2009). In addition, the development of critical consciousness, which includes “critiquing relations of power, questioning one’s assumptions about reality, and reflecting on the complexities of multiple identities” (Nieto & McDonough, 2011, p. 366) is also an essential part of effective teacher preparation.

Fourth, urban-focused teacher preparation programs must take seriously the mandate to prepare teacher candidates to meet the needs of all students. Given the demographic divide that exists between the majority of teacher candidates and the diverse student population of many urban communities, the reality is that many teachers “will continue to come into contact with students whose cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds differ from their own” and therefore “must be able to construct pedagogical practices that have relevance and meaning to students’ social and cultural realities” (Howard, 2003, p. 195). Scholars have used the concepts of multicultural education (Grant, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sleeter & Carmona, 2016) and culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogy to theorize, describe, and research this approach to teaching and learning (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2016). At its core, “culturally responsive education is about teaching the students in front of you” (NYSED, 2019, p. 10). It involves, among other things, understanding, valuing, and building on students’ unique backgrounds, culture, and language, developing deep and authentic relationships with students, engaging students in authentic and relevant learning experiences, and confronting and challenging injustice in schools and society.

Fifth, program coherence and the integration of coursework and clinical practice are essential components of effective teacher preparation programs.

Teacher education programs that have coherent visions of teaching and learning, and that integrate related strategies

across field placements, have a greater impact on the initial conceptions and practices of prospective teachers than those that remain a collection of relatively disconnected courses. (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005, p. 392)

Coursework that does not support or relate to clinical practice contributes to a divide between theory and practice. Likewise, field work that is not connected to coursework also leads to a lack of a coherent vision for teaching.

## **Community Collaboration in Urban-Focused Teacher Preparation**

These characteristics, then, have been demonstrated to be effective in the preparation of teachers for work in urban schools. School and community partnerships have also been highlighted as effective tools in teacher preparation (Noel, 2013). As noted in the educational literature, teachers need to understand the communities in which they work, how to develop strong relationships with students, families, and community members, and how to use this knowledge and relationships to support student learning (Milner, 2010; Zeichner, Bowman, Guillen, & Napolitan, 2016). Additionally, the research has highlighted the positive impact of strong collaboration and partnerships between teacher education programs and local schools and communities. Referencing the evidence presented in her edited book, *Moving Teacher Education into Urban Schools and Communities: Prioritizing Community Strengths*, Noel (2013) “urges teacher educators to move all or part of their programs directly into urban schools and communities” (p. 217). This allows teacher education programs to develop proactive relationships in places “where practice-based and practice-sensitive research can be carried about collaboratively by teachers, teacher educators, and researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 309) and to situate teacher candidate learning directly within the context of the object of study (Stairs & Friedman, 2013).

Moving beyond general arguments in favor of collaboration between teacher education programs and communities, I argue that such collaborations and partnerships are absolutely essential for programs in Christian college and universities that truly desire to equip teacher candidates for work in urban schools. Without authentic engagement with local communities, Christian teacher preparation programs are unlikely to be able to incorporate the qualities and areas of emphasis associated with effective urban-focused teacher preparation. In contrast, engaging with schools and communities enables these programs to overcome many common constraints and facilitates an environment that allows their teacher candidates to flourish in their preparation while also engaging in transformative work along with local communities. In the following section, then, I revisit the characteristics of effective urban-focused teacher preparation and highlight the ways that collaborative engagement with schools and communities support these components while also enabling teacher education programs to provide candidates with deeper, more authentic, and more powerful learning experiences while also engaging with local communities in transformative ways.

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First, it is clear that the cultural immersion of teacher candidates requires collaboration and partnerships with local communities. Authentic engagement allows the teacher candidates' experience to move beyond the artificial domains of the university or of a single field-based practicum (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). A commitment to this sort of engagement will open the door to extended service-learning opportunities and the development of transformative relationships with members of the community. It gives prospective teachers the

opportunity to interact with children outside of school and to interact with them in community centers, after-school activities, places of worship, and other places that are important in their lives. They are able to see students participating in clubs, teams, or other involvements where they likely are experiencing success in ways that are not always visible in school (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). Furthermore, this deeper understanding of urban students and communities allows teachers to build on students' experiences and preexisting knowledge in their classes and also in order to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs (Milner, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Emdin (2016) described three basic steps to learning about and engaging with the context of students' lives. First, teachers need to spend time in the social spaces of their students. This includes local businesses near the school and other public places where students spend time after school. It can also include parks, places of worship, residential areas, and places where students might gather. Second, teachers need to engage with the context, striving to make sense of what has been observed in the community. Finally, effective teachers make "connections between the out-of-school context and classroom teaching" (Emdin, 2016, p. 140). This process, the foundation of Emdin's "reality pedagogy," is made possible through collaboration with local schools and communities.

Collaboration with urban communities also allows teacher candidates to experience difference in more meaningful ways. Ladson-Billings (2006b) argued, "If we are serious about students learning about culture, we need to help them first become careful observers of culture, both in the communities in which they will teach and in themselves" (p. 109). Engagement in local communities is probably the only way teacher candidates will have an authentic opportunity to learn about culture in this way. Furthermore, partnerships with local schools and communities will allow teacher candidates to experience and learn about culture and community through relationships with members of the community. Instead of relying on university-based experts, teacher candidates learn from members of the community who are able to share alternate

## URBAN-FOCUSED AND COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHER PREPARATION

perspectives and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). True community engagement will push teacher education programs to involve community voices and expert, practicing teachers from local schools throughout the program.

Second, collaboration and engagement with schools and communities allows teacher preparation programs to equip candidates with a framework that moves beyond the theoretical to include understanding based on authentic relationships and interactions with urban spaces. Genuine engagement gives teacher candidates the context needed to truly understand and interpret students' lived experiences, their cultural and linguistic background, and the societal structures that impact all aspects of their lives. For example, the university classroom may provide the opportunity for candidates to read about and discuss the deficit narratives that often dominate the discourse around urban schools and students. However, authentic and extended engagement in local communities gives teacher candidates names, faces, and voices through which they can challenge these narratives and seek to overcome their negative impact.

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In addition, strong partnerships with local schools and communities provide teacher candidates with new and diverse perspectives to aid them in developing the needed framework. Teacher education programs in relatively small colleges and universities, which is quite common among Christian institutions of higher education, often lack the resources to provide the expert knowledge that is available in local schools and communities. All too often there is a lack of racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity among the faculty of such institutions. Furthermore, while these programs desire to equip their candidates to

understand cultural diversity and to be able to teach effectively in urban schools, the faculty may lack experience working in urban contexts or in confronting the structural oppression that negatively impacts so many schools and communities. Meaningful partnerships with local schools and teachers allow expert, practicing teachers to be a central part of the teacher education program as they function as school-based teacher educators who are not only valued for what they do but also are incorporated into the planning, teaching, and evaluation of the teacher education program.

Third, in a similar fashion, community and engagement and collaboration with local schools provides the context in which teacher candidates can engage critically and authentically with issues of equity and justice. For example, teacher candidates are able to witness and struggle with the impact of structural racism rather than just learning about in in the university classroom. Discussions of inequitable and discriminatory school disciplinary practices are able to move beyond the statistics and social media stories to include the realities experienced by students with whom candidates have developed relationships. Teacher candidates are able to actually hear and engage with the voices of protest rather than being limited to the pages of the academic textbook or journal article. In an era when terms such as equity and social justice are often disparaged or are used simply as jargon with little or no attempt at engagement, genuine engagement with local communities provides the context in which teacher candidates can wrestle with and understand equity and justice. Furthermore, teachers and other community members contribute their voices and perspectives in a way that provides additional nuance to the teacher candidates' engagement with equity and justice. As noted by teacher candidates who had participated in a community collaboration, "there is a big difference between reading something or discussing complex issues with a professor and hearing it and discussing it with community mentors" (Zeichner et al., 2016, p. 286).

Fourth, there is broad agreement that teacher candidates need to understand culturally responsive education. Meaningful engagement with urban students, schools, and communities

provides the context in which they can truly comprehend what this means and begin to embody and implement practices that support all of their students. Clearly, urban-focused teacher preparation requires extended contact with students who come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Teacher education programs situated—via community and school collaborations—in urban communities give the teacher candidates the ability to move beyond superficial understandings that often reify existing stereotypes and allow them to establish deeper relationships upon which they can build their teaching practice. Pedagogy that is culturally relevant and sustaining requires deep knowledge of students' lives, their communities and families, and their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Duncan-Andrade, 2018). A one semester placement in an urban school or a university-based course in culturally responsive education cannot provide teacher candidates with the depth of knowledge and understanding required to effectively teach in this way. In contrast, school and community partnerships provide teacher candidates opportunities to learn about and engage in culturally responsive pedagogy “in schools and classrooms that value students' diverse cultures in connection with university programs that hold a strong commitment to educating students in historically underserved urban schools” (Olson & Rao, 2016, p. 139).

Finally, community collaboration also supports program coherence in important ways. It situates the learning in authentically urban contexts and combats the lack of coherence that often accompanies the separation of theory and practice associated with traditional teacher education. The guiding vision and frameworks of the urban-focused teacher preparation are lived out by the teacher candidates through their engagement with schools and communities. This provides multiple opportunities for the teacher candidates to interrogate theory through the lens of urban education practice and to reflect on that practice based on their growing understanding of urban students, families, and communities. Zeichner and Payne (2013) argued that university-school partnerships allow for the creation of “hybrid spaces” in which “academic, school-based, and

community-based knowledge come together in less hierarchical and haphazard ways to support teacher learning” (p. 6).

## Conclusion

The work of preparing teachers for work in urban schools and communities is both challenging and important. There remains a need for more and better prepared teachers. In addition, a focus on urban education is necessary as we seek to confront challenges and inequities that exist in many communities. Christian teacher education programs have an obligation to engage in this work in response to God's call to pursue justice and shalom in urban schools and communities.

While urban-focused teacher preparation requires a commitment that often has been missing in Christian colleges and universities, genuine collaboration and partnership with urban communities and schools provides the opportunity for these institutions to engage effectively in this work while also strengthening relationships with local communities. Such collaborations allow Christian teacher education programs to expand their resources and the learning opportunities available to teacher candidates through the involvement of community members and practicing teachers who are able to offer diverse perspectives and a greater understanding of urban communities. In addition, engagement in local schools and communities provides deeper experiences, understandings, and foundational perspectives that have been linked to effective teacher preparation. For many programs, this sort of collaboration requires moving beyond current practice and committing to establishing and facilitating meaningful and long-lasting partnerships. However, programs truly desiring to equip their teachers for work in urban schools and communities as part of God's kingdom work need to recognize this as an essential and powerful component of their program.

While all urban-focused teacher preparation programs benefit from this sort of increased engagement with local schools and communities, Christian colleges and universities are able to approach this work in unique and powerful ways. First, the biblical vision of creation, that “God created the world in a web of relationships that



overflowed with forceful goodness” (Harper, 2016, p. 13) provides the basis for authentic collaboration and community engagement. It goes beyond providing a better teacher preparation experience for future candidates or desiring to positively impact the learning of students in local schools. While pursuing these important goals, it also seeks to nurture caring relationships that serve as a foundation for something far more lasting and significant. Second, the recognition that all persons are created in God’s image and are worthy of dignity and respect deepens these relationships and provides a clear basis for the pursuit of equity and justice in education and society. Furthermore, a teacher education program that seeks to be faithful to God’s call provides teacher candidates with a clear purpose. They understand that the pursuit of just and harmonious relationships, seeking shalom, “is both God’s call in the world and our human calling” (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 72). For teacher education programs in Christian colleges and universities, urban-focused and community-based teacher preparation becomes one way that we “participate in the kingdom as its agents, witnesses, and models” (Plantinga, 2002, p. 109).

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## URBAN-FOCUSED AND COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHER PREPARATION

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