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## The challenges of beginning teachers in urban primary schools

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides insight in the variety of urban-related challenges that beginning teachers experience in urban schools. Literature on urban teaching focuses on teaching children from low socio-economic status (SES) and/or culturally diverse backgrounds. In many European cities, however, schools are populated by both children from relatively high and from low-SES backgrounds. This study examined the problems and challenges of beginning teachers in Dutch urban primary schools. Teachers were interviewed at schools with different student populations. Results showed that, although many of the challenges that beginning teachers experienced concern the same themes, their actual manifestation differed related to schools' student populations. For instance, the problem of 'parental contact' referred to both the extreme involvement and demands of highly educated wealthy parents at some schools and the diverse backgrounds of parents at other schools. Results of the study can be used to develop adequate preparation and support for beginning urban teachers.

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### KEYWORDS

Beginning teachers; teacher education; professional development; urban teaching; teacher retention

## Introduction

The dropout rate of beginning teachers is relatively high (Bruinsma and Jansen 2010), especially in urban areas (Ingersoll 2003). Teaching in urban schools is difficult and challenging (Groulx 2001; Smith and Smith 2006), and a relatively high number of teachers tend to leave these schools and the education profession in general. A shortage of good qualified teachers has major implications for the quality of education and thus the development prospects of children. Research has shown that teachers are often not well prepared for teaching in urban schools (Erskine-Cullen and Sinclair 1996; Çelik and Amaç 2012). This is understandable: a full preparation for urban teaching is difficult to achieve because the problems of urban teachers and the schools in which they will be employed are so diverse.

Both professional development programmes outside the school and induction programmes inside the school can positively contribute to the retention and professional development of teachers (Borko 2004; Gilles, Davis, and McGlamery 2009; Gaikhorst et al. 2015). Research has shown that it is important for these programmes to focus on the problems and

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support needs that teachers experience in the specific context in which they operate (Siwatu 2011). However, little is known about the problems and challenges beginning teachers experience in (European) urban schools.

Therefore, to develop good preparation and support programmes for urban teachers, it is important to obtain a clear picture of the problems faced by (starting) teachers in urban schools. The majority of research concerning urban teaching is based upon the situation in 'urban schools with a student population primarily consisting of children from lower socio-economic status (SES) and often also culturally diverse backgrounds (see, for instance, Castro, Kelly, and Shih 2010; Severiens, Wolff, and van Herpen 2013). Little research has been performed, however, on the situation in urban schools with a student population from primarily high-SES backgrounds or schools where the student population is more mixed in terms of SES and cultural background. These schools are also common and characteristic of the situation in many large cities, and teachers must also be prepared and supported for teaching in these schools (Hooge 2008).

The central aim of this study was to identify the specific challenges for beginning teachers at urban primary schools in order to provide suggestions for the content of induction programmes for urban teachers. We focused on the challenges of teachers in urban schools with different kinds of student populations in the Netherlands.

### ***Teacher induction***

In the last decade, research on teacher induction has focused more and more on the role of the school organisational context as an important factor determining whether beginning teachers experience problems and of what kind these problems are. Leadership, school culture, and teacher collaboration are factors that have been found to influence teachers' professional development, retention and the extent to which teachers experience problems (Flores and Day 2006; Kardos and Moore Johnson 2007; Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko 2010; Luft et al. 2011; Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens and Volman 2014; Langdon et al. 2014). For instance, Kardos and Moore Johnson (2007) found that beginning teachers were more likely to stay in the teaching profession when they work in 'integrated cultures', in which beginning and experienced teacher collaborate and exchange expertise and experiences.

In addition, there are studies that have demonstrated that the dimension of context (urban vs. rural) can have significant effects on beginning teachers' experiences (Knoblauch and Woolfolk Hoy 2008; Siwatu 2011). According to several studies, induction should be focused on the problems and actual needs that teachers experience in the specific context in which they work (e.g. Davis, Petish, and Smithy 2006; Siwatu 2011). Research of Gaikhorst et al. (2014) showed that urban schools where beginning teachers judged the induction they received negatively, offered almost no specific support regarding urban-related problems. Thus, teacher induction for beginning urban teachers needs to be tailored to the specific challenges that occur in the urban educational context. However, the field lacks a description of challenges of beginning urban teachers from (European) urban schools with different kinds of student populations. Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of beginning teachers in the urban educational context of the Netherlands.

### ***Teaching in urban environments***

The largest cities of the Netherlands can be considered as global cities. Global cities are characterised by a large financial sector, many business services, the headquarters of many

large (multinational) companies and pioneering activities and achievements on a global level (Fainstain 2001; Sassen 2002). Social polarisation is typical for global cities: the residents are highly educated individuals with extraordinarily high incomes who live in wealthy, safe neighbourhoods on the one hand and less educated individuals with low incomes in relatively poor, unsafe areas on the other. A reason for this polarisation is the particular economic structure of global cities: on the one hand, opportunities exist for people to earn exceptionally high incomes and, on the other hand, a demand exists for low-paid, low-skill workers. Middle incomes are marginalised (Van der Wouden and de Bruijne 2001; Sassen 2002). Social polarisation in global cities is reflected in schools: some schools primarily educate children from high-SES families and others educate children from lower SES families and often also with culturally diverse backgrounds. Also 'mixed schools' can be found where the student population is a mix of both types of students (Hooge 2008). Beginning teachers in global cities may thus be confronted with a variety of student populations.

In our study, we did not limit the definition of urban teaching to teaching in schools that serve primarily children from families with low-SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds, but also focused on challenges of teaching in schools with students from high-SES and mixed student populations, as teachers in global cities must be equipped and supported for teaching in schools with these different kinds of student populations.

### ***Challenges for beginning teachers in an urban context***

Beginning teachers in an urban context must deal with the challenges that apply to all beginning teachers. Additionally, they must address the challenges that are specifically related to teaching in an urban context.

#### ***Challenges for beginning teachers***

In 1984, Veenman reviewed 83 international articles and developed a list of the problems perceived by starting teachers. Some of these problems included classroom discipline, contact with parents, relationships with colleagues and principals, insufficient preparation and spare time, the burden of clerical work and inadequate guidance and support.

Recent studies confirmed several results from Veenman's study; the problems of classroom discipline, the difficulties in collaboration with parents, colleagues and school principals and inadequate guidance and support (de Jonge and de Muijnck 2002; Schuck et al. 2012). The problem of a high workload was also acknowledged (Abbott, Moran, and Clarke 2009).

#### ***Challenges for beginning teachers in an urban context***

The literature on urban teaching identified several challenges that beginning urban teachers are specifically confronted with. The focus in this literature is on schools with students from low-SES and often also culturally diverse backgrounds. One important challenge that has been mentioned in various articles is that urban teachers are confronted with *cultural diversity* (Erskine-Cullen and Sinclair 1996; Groulx 2001). Urban teachers work with children and parents from different cultures, with different backgrounds and values and who speak a language other than the teacher's native language (Diffily and Perkins 2002; Zeichner 2003). Zeichner (2003) points at the increasing gap between the backgrounds of students and teachers which makes it difficult to teach at urban schools. Groulx (2001) argues that teachers need to develop the cultural competence to address the difficulties of cultural diversity.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) emphasise the importance of ‘culturally sensitive teachers’ who have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds and see resources for learning in their students rather than difficulties to overcome. According to Levine-Rasky (1998), beginning teachers find it difficult to bring cultural sensitivity to their dealing with culturally diverse groups of students. In the study of Erskine-Cullen and Sinclair (1996), urban school teachers identified working with parents, and especially communicating with parents, as one of the biggest challenges of teaching at urban schools, primarily because of language barriers.

Another important challenge for education in an urban context is that teachers are confronted with relatively large *differences* within their classroom. Teachers must deal with differences between children in terms of character, behaviour, norms and values and attitudes, together with differences in the students’ cognitive and language development (Swanson Gehrke 2005; Kooy 2006; Cajkler and Hall 2012). Regarding differences in language development, second language learners are a major challenge for urban teachers. Urban teachers must also deal with a relatively high number of students who are at risk of academic failure (Swanson Gehrke 2005).

Furthermore, *violence* and *poverty* are important challenges for urban education. Teachers in urban schools felt anxiety about the students’ use of violence at school and also showed fear of the neighbourhoods in which they worked (Smith and Smith 2006). Many teachers in Smith and Smith’s (2006) study left the school or the teaching profession because of violence-induced stress. They must also address the numerous factors that impact students’ learning and development, including hunger, anger, fear, illness, conflict and death (Swanson Gehrke 2005).

### **The present study**

Several challenges of teaching in an urban context are described in the literature. However, primarily the challenges in schools with children from low-SES and culturally diverse backgrounds are addressed and little is known about how teachers themselves experience the urban challenges they encounter. The aim of this study was to identify the specific problems of beginning teachers in urban primary schools with different kinds of student populations. The central research question is formulated as follows:

What are the challenges that beginning teachers encounter in urban primary schools with different kinds of student populations?

To answer these questions, an exploratory study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured topic interviews with 15 beginning teachers from 15 Dutch urban primary schools. A qualitative research method was used because we were interested in how teachers experienced the challenges of teaching in urban schools. We wanted to investigate which of the urban challenges identified in the literature and possible additional challenges were perceived to be real problems that need to be addressed in induction programmes.

### **Context of the study**

The participants in this study were starting teachers in primary schools in two large Dutch cities (Amsterdam and Utrecht). Although the number of inhabitants in these cities is not high compared to cities in other countries (approximately 780,000 and 320,000), these cities are considered to be global cities. They are characterised by social polarisation and there

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the teachers.

Starting teachers at urban primary schools ( <i>n</i> = 15)	
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	0
Female	15
<i>Years working as a teacher</i>	
First year	7
Second year	3
Third to fifth year	5
<i>School population</i>	
Low SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds	5
Mixed	5
High SES	5
<i>Age</i>	
20–30 years	12
30+	3
<i>Class (ranges from 1–8)</i>	
Lower grades	6
Middle grades	6
Higher grades	3

has been a steady outflow of the middle class (Hooge 2008; Van der Wouden and de Bruijne 2001). Schools with a variety of student populations (high SES, low SES or mixed) are typical of both cities.

## Method

### Participants

The method that was used to find and select participants for the study was ‘purposive sampling’. Teachers were contacted and selected on the basis of their teaching experience and school type. All teachers that participated in the study were in the early stages of their teaching career. A teacher was considered ‘beginning’ when he or she had less than six years of teaching experience (Eliophotou Menon 2012). Furthermore, teachers were selected on the basis of their school context: five teachers from urban schools with 0–30% students from high SES, five teachers from urban schools with 80–100% students from low SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds, and five teachers from schools with 30–80% students from both high and low SES. The characteristics of the participating teachers can be found in Table 1. They all had a bachelor’s degree in teacher education.

### Variables and instruments

The interviews consisted of two parts. In the first part, the interviewer asked open questions about the challenges the teachers had encountered. The interviewer used two introductory questions to start the participant thinking about her first year as a teacher. Afterwards, a question was asked about the problems that the teacher encountered in her first year as a teacher at an urban school. We emphasised that we were interested in difficulties that the teacher ran into, both difficulties that they were able to solve (challenges) and difficulties they could not solve (problems). The interview continued by delving

into each of the challenges/problems that the interviewee raised, by discussing whether the teacher thought that these challenges/problems were related to teaching in an urban school.

In the second part of the interview, the challenges that were identified in the international literature were discussed (see Table 3). These eight challenges were presented to the teachers. Each participant was asked to indicate which of the challenges she had encountered as a problem. If the participant perceived a challenge as a problem, the interviewer asked to elaborate on his/her experiences with the problem and whether the participant considered this a typical 'urban' problem. For the challenges that the interviewee did not encounter or did not consider a problem, the interviewee was asked to explain why not.

### **Data analysis**

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to prevent interpretation bias from the interviewer. After the researcher transcribed an interview, it was sent to each of the participants for a check on authenticity. The participants were asked whether they wanted to add or correct something; a total of 13 participants responded to this email and they did not ask for changes.

Content analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Miles and Huberman 1994). The cycle of content analysis consists of four steps that should be conducted continuously: data reduction, data display, drawing conclusions, and verification. Data reduction was performed by labelling the relevant fragments in the transcribed interviews. Labelling was done using the programme Atlas Ti. A code was assigned to each problem that the teachers mentioned themselves during the first part of the interview (such as dealing with a high workload) and to each challenge from the literature on urban teaching (for example, dealing with second language learners) in the second part of the interview. Fragments related to the same problems or problem-related topics were grouped to discover patterns that could be part of a particular trend or an interesting relationship. When labelling relevant fragments, specific citations were selected for illustrative purposes. Possible conclusions were drawn based on these patterns and were later verified by examining similar fragments from other interviews or opposing claims made by other teachers.

The interview responses were examined and coded by the first author. Because of the interpretative and iterative nature of the data analysis, it was not possible to determine inter-rater reliability (Akkerman et al. 2008). To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the following procedures were followed:

- (1) All fragments that were difficult to code, in the perception of the coder, were discussed with another experienced researcher. These fragments and codes were discussed until consensus was reached and the coding was adjusted to the outcome of this discussion.
- (2) The interpretations of the first author were audited by a procedure, whereby the codes of a (randomly chosen) scored interview (10%) were checked and discussed in a peer review by two other experienced researchers (Kvale 2007). The coding showed a 93% agreement. The codes were discussed until agreement was established and coding was adjusted to match the outcome of this discussion.

**Table 2.** Problems raised by the teachers.

Problem	School population		
	High SES	Mixed	Low SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds
<i>Frequently mentioned problems</i>			
High workload, significant stress	2	3	3
No guidance & support at school	3	3	1
Contact with parents	4	1	0
<i>Less frequently mentioned problems</i>			
Lack of structure in the school organisation and lack of information/administration	2	1	1
Dealing with children who require special attention	1	1	1
The planning of schooldays and organisation of class work	0	1	2
Dealing with new tasks	2	0	0
Carrying the full responsibility of a class	0	1	1
Constraining personal perfectionism and desire for control	1	1	0
Children's home situation/upbringing	0	0	2

## Results

### *Challenges and problems*

The problems raised by the teachers themselves will be examined first; then, the occurrence of the eight challenges from the literature (see Table 3) will be discussed.

### *Challenges and problems raised by the teachers*

Table 2 displays the challenges that the 15 teachers raised during the first part of the interview. The most prominent problems will be discussed in detail.

#### *High workload and significant stress*

The first issue, 'high workload and significant stress', was a challenge and problem reported by the majority of teachers. Several teachers stated that they worked many hours in the beginning of their career, including evening and weekends. One teacher declared:

I worked at school from 7 in the morning until half past 6 at night. At night I would prepare my lessons. I was used to working hard in my previous career, but as a teacher, you have to do so many new things and you carry such a high responsibility ... I have never been so tired in my entire life.

The problem of a high workload occurred at all schools, but interviewees mentioned different reasons, dependent of the student population. Teachers at schools with primarily children from low-SES families mentioned that they experienced pressure because they had difficulty meeting the standards of the educational inspectorate, whereas the teachers at schools with children from highly educated parents attributed their stress to having to work with critical and demanding parents.

### ***No guidance and support***

The second issue, 'no guidance and support', was a problem identified by seven teachers. One teacher explained:

Basically, you had to figure it all out yourself ... That was the main reason why I had so much trouble in my first year. They basically left me to my faith. Nobody guided me at all, although I often asked for [support or supervision].

Interestingly, teachers at schools with primarily children from low-SES families rarely mentioned the problem of 'no guidance and support', whereas the teachers at the other schools did experience this problem. The teachers themselves thought that the reason for this difference could be that schools with students from low-SES families receive more money from the government and can thus invest more in support.<sup>1</sup> A teacher from a low-SES school explained:

I started here with 14 children, so that's half the number of my previous school. [...] Here I have much more guidance. And I have someone extra in my classroom every day ... I think that is the case here, that there is more money for extra guidance of teachers and also for smaller classes.

Three teachers thought that there is not enough time to establish strong support structures for beginning teachers in urban schools, because these are very often large schools that must manage many complex issues.

### ***Contact with parents***

The third issue, 'contact with parents', was a challenge and problem for five teachers. Interestingly, almost all of these teachers were from schools where children have highly educated parents. The majority of the teachers believed that the problem of parental contact was related to teaching in an urban school; according to these teachers, there are many critical parents in urban environments. Teachers framed the problem in a negative way and described the parents at their schools as being very critical of the teachers, thereby placing heavy demands on them. One teacher explained:

I have difficulties with the contact with parents [...] I think that this problem is related, in particular to an advantaged school with highly educated white parents; they are extremely critical. They all have children very late and thus have only one or two [children], so those children are really their golden eggs.

It is remarkable that none of the teachers at the schools with students from low-SES families mentioned the problem of parental contact.

### ***Challenges found in the literature that were recognised by the teachers***

Table 3 shows the three main challenges and eight sub-challenges found in the international scientific literature and the number of teachers who recognised and perceived these challenges as problems, grouped by school type.

### ***Dealing with diversity***

The first challenge, 'dealing with children from a different culture, background and values and who speak a different language than the teacher', was perceived as a challenge and problem by three of the five teachers from the low-SES schools. Most of the teachers at these schools explained that they were not well prepared for this issue at teacher training

**Table 3.** International challenges recognised as problems by the teachers.

Problem	School population		
	High SES	Mixed	Low SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds
Cultural diversity			
1. Cultural background of children	0	0	3
2. (Cultural) background of parents	5	1	3
3. Second language learners	0	2	2
Differences			
4. Diversity	3	0	1
5. Adaptive education	3	2	3 <sup>a</sup>
6. Children at risk	4	4	3
Violence and poverty			
7. Violence, insecurity	2	0	3
8. Children's home situation	0	2	5

Note:  $N = 15$  (5 per school type).

<sup>a</sup>Problem was only discussed with three of the teachers from this group.

education. The teachers at schools with children from high-SES families did not have many children from different backgrounds in their class. The teachers at the mixed schools did not find this issue to be problematic because they were either taught how to deal with this issue at teacher training college (for instance by modules about cultural diversity) or they specialised in this topic because they found it so interesting.

The second challenge, 'dealing with parents from a different culture or background and values and/or who speak a different language than the teacher', was recognised as a challenge and problem by all teachers at the high-SES schools, one teacher at a mixed school and three teachers at the low-SES schools. The teachers at the high-SES schools stated that they had no experience with parents from different cultural backgrounds, but that they did have trouble with the demands and expectations of highly educated and critical parents. The teachers who experienced a problem with parental contact at the other schools stated that the problem was primarily caused by a language barrier because the parents did not speak Dutch.

The third topic, 'Teaching Dutch to children who were brought up with a different language', was problematic for two teachers at the mixed and two teachers at the schools with primarily children from low-SES families. The teachers at the other schools had few students with a different mother tongue.

The teachers, who experienced this difficulty, saw it as typical for teaching in an urban school, because relatively many non-Dutch children live in cities. Most of the teachers who did not experience this problem mentioned having a good method for addressing language deficiencies at their school.

### *Dealing with individual differences*

The fourth problem, 'dealing with differences between children in terms of character, behaviour, norms and values and attitude' was recognised and perceived as a challenge by three teachers at high-SES schools and one teacher at a low-SES school.

According to two of the teachers who recognised this issue as problematic, the problem of dealing with diversity is related to teaching at an urban school. One of these teachers believed that the school's size plays an important role: according to her, in bigger schools,

there are simply more children and therefore also more differences than in smaller schools. The other teacher framed the problem as follows: children in big cities are confronted with many impulses and some children therefore have more difficulty concentrating at school.

Teachers at the mixed schools did not find this issue problematic, some of them because they were taught how to deal with this issue during teacher training. The teachers at the low-SES schools who did not experience differences between children as being problematic indicated that their classes were quite homogeneous in terms of the characters, behaviour, norms and values, attitudes and cultural backgrounds of the children.

The fifth topic, 'Adapting to the differences in cognitive development and language development of children; being able to differentiate education', was a challenge and problem for most of the teachers. There were no remarkable differences between the schools.

Most teachers did not believe that this challenge was linked to teaching at urban schools, although some teachers acknowledged that urban school classes might be bigger and less homogeneous than school classes in the countryside, thereby making it more difficult to address differences. Several teachers who did not have difficulty with this issue worked at a school where the entire educational approach was constructed around education adapted to children's individual needs.

The sixth topic, 'The capacity to pay sufficient attention to students at risk of academic failure', was recognised by the majority of the teachers. This challenge occurred more often in high-SES and mixed schools than in schools with students from low-SES families. The teachers at the high-SES schools mentioned that they had serious trouble with this issue, primarily because of the large classes and the fact that their school received no extra money from the government for extra guidance for students at risk. These teachers experienced not only problems with differentiation for the children at risk, but also with differentiation upwards. One teacher explained:

Very often, you pay a lot of extra time and attention to the less intelligent children, but you have also children who are highly intelligent. You let them just join the group, while you should lift them up. I find this very difficult as a beginning teacher.

The majority of the teachers who experienced this problem believed that the problem was related to teaching in an urban environment. According to several teachers, there are more children at risk in urban environments than elsewhere, because of the relatively high number of children from immigrant and low-SES families.

Teachers at schools with children from low-SES families who had no troubles with this issue mentioned that they had smaller classes and received extra guidance.

### ***Dealing with violence and poverty***

The seventh topic, 'Violence at school or an unsafe atmosphere at school or in the neighbourhood of the school', was recognised as a problem by two teachers at schools with mainly children from highly educated families and three teachers at schools with a population consisting of children from ethnic minorities. The teachers at these latter schools did not feel unsafe themselves, but explained how their students can sometimes feel unsafe at school:

I did not experience anything [violent] myself, but the children in my class did. I do feel secure at school and around the school by the way, but I believe that this might be different for the children. That bothers me a lot.

The majority of the teachers who recognised the challenge of violence and an unsafe atmosphere believed that the problem was related to teaching in urban schools. According to these teachers, children in large cities are often hanging around in the streets at night and some of them live in unsafe neighbourhoods.

The teachers who did not experience this problem either said they worked at a school in a safe neighbourhood or mentioned the good policies and pedagogical methods of their school to address violence among students.

The eighth topic, 'Being able to address the fact that some students experience particular circumstances such as hunger, fear, illness and aggression on a daily basis at home', was an issue that was perceived as a challenge and problem by all of the teachers at low-SES schools and by two teachers at a mixed school. The teachers who experienced this problem believed that the problem was related to teaching in an urban school. One teacher explained that many families in deprived urban neighbourhoods are 'multi-problem families', with many issues occurring at home. It was often hard for the teachers to emotionally deal with the fact that these children live their daily lives under these circumstances. The other teachers told a similar story. One teacher explained:

I find this very difficult at times, because a child has a right to affection, but also a right to have breakfast in the morning. Especially in the beginning, I found this very hard to cope with.

Teachers at the other schools mentioned that they did not have trouble with this issue simply because the problem did not occur in their school or its neighbourhood.

## Conclusion

This study identified several challenges that beginning teachers encounter in urban primary schools. The most prominent challenges and problems that the teachers identified were not phrased in urban-specific terms: a high workload, stress and inadequate guidance and support. Another frequently mentioned challenge, however, was parental contact. Interactions with highly educated and critical parents as well as interactions with parents from cultural minority groups were mentioned as difficult to handle. With regard to the challenges identified in the literature as 'urban school problems', three issues were most often recognised by the teachers as problematic: (1) Too little time and capacity to pay sufficient attention to students 'at risk of academic failure', (2) Adapting to the differences in cognitive development and language development of children, (3) dealing with parents from a different culture or background and values and/or who speak a different language than the teacher.

These 'urban school problems' occurred in urban schools with different student populations. However, teachers mentioned different reasons why they found it difficult to deal with these problems; in schools with children from high-SES families, teachers related their problems to large group sizes and demanding and critical parents; in schools with primarily children from low-SES and/or culturally diverse backgrounds, because of large numbers of children who need special attention and pressure from the educational inspectorate to raise cognitive achievements.

Thus, teachers at urban schools with different student populations all experienced 'urban-related' problems, but the actual form of these problems was related to the schools' specific student population. For instance, the problem of 'parental contact' referred to the extreme involvement and demands of parents at schools with high-educated, wealthy parents and to the diverse backgrounds of parents at schools with diverse student populations.

Furthermore, it appeared that teachers at schools with children from high-SES families and at mixed schools experienced problems that were, to a certain extent, different from the problems of urban teachers at schools with primarily students from low-SES families. One specific problem for the teachers from the high-SES and mixed schools was applying differentiation to adequately teach both high-performing students and students who are 'at risk of academic failure'. The teachers at schools with students from low-SES and culturally diverse backgrounds experienced specific problems that were related to their student population, such as dealing with cultural diversity.

## Discussion

This research aimed to contribute to our knowledge regarding teaching in urban schools. The study identified several problems that teachers encounter in urban primary schools. The insights from this study can be used to shape the content of induction programmes for urban teachers. Many of the problems experienced by the urban teachers were general problems that could also be experienced by non-urban teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers who participated in this study experienced these problems as being related to the specific urban context in which they worked. For instance, the problem of parental contact is a problem that is also experienced by non-urban teachers (Veenman 1984; Schuck et al. 2012). However, in this study, the problem specifically referred to the extreme involvement, demands and expectations of parents at the schools with children from high-SES families and to the diverse backgrounds of parents at the other schools.

Another important finding of this study is that not only teachers from urban schools that primarily serve children from low-SES families, but also teachers from urban schools with students from high income families experience urban-related challenges such as dealing with large differences in the classroom and children at risk, but unlike their colleagues in the low-SES schools, they must deal with these issues in large classes and under the watchful eye of parents who demand attention and good results for their children. Therefore, it is important to invest not only in good preparation and support for beginning teachers in schools with children from low-SES families, but also for teachers at urban schools with students from highly educated families with high incomes. On the other hand, the 'urban challenges' that were recognised by teachers from schools with students from low-SES and culturally diverse backgrounds, like dealing with language differences and cultural diversity, were not always perceived as problems. This might be the case because schools with many children from low SES are – in the Dutch context – extra facilitated to support their students, for example by a smaller number of students per class or additional guidance in the classroom. This was – according to the teachers – the reason that they did not always experience the 'urban challenges' in their school as real problems. Some of these teachers also indicated that they were well prepared and supported in school to deal with these challenges.

This study showed that teachers at urban primary schools experience various 'urban-related' problems that were influenced by the specific student populations of their schools. It is important that initial teacher education addresses the various problems that teachers may be confronted with when they start teaching at urban schools. In the Netherlands, there is no fixed programme in teacher education for teaching in an urban context. Because the problems of urban teachers are so diverse, teacher education cannot fully prepare teachers for all challenges of urban teaching. Therefore, it is also important that opportunities for

continued professionalisation aimed at teaching in an urban context are available and that urban schools themselves provide good and specialised support for their (beginning) teachers.

This study underlines the value of good preparation and support for beginning teachers. Several teachers in this study did not perceive the challenges of urban schools as problems but instead as interesting challenges through which they could further develop themselves. These were the teachers who also reported receiving good preparation and support. Thus, adequate preparation and support through which teachers learn how to manage the issues of urban teaching can transform these issues from problems into interesting challenges for teachers. This outcome is in line with other studies that show the value of good support for beginning teachers (e.g. Feiman-Nemser 2001; Flores and Day 2006; Kardos and Moore Johnson 2007). The contribution of this study to the existing knowledge on teacher induction is that it provides suggestions for the *content* of support programmes for beginning urban teachers.

The studies of Bruinsma and Jansen (2010) and Luft et al. (2011) showed that first teaching experiences are very important for teachers. If these experiences are positive, then they will have a beneficial effect on teacher attrition. This study suggests that beginning teachers who receive support with a focus on urban themes do not experience the complexity of urban teaching as a real problem, but rather as an interesting challenge to overcome, and thus have more positive teaching experiences. This underlines the importance of support/induction programmes that address urban themes that emerged from this study.

This study has some limitations, and more research into urban teaching is needed. First, there were no teachers from outside the city in our sample, so we cannot make a proper comparison. Second, this study was a small-scale research project and the results cannot be generalised. The small-scale design did make it possible to obtain more insight in the variation of perceived problems of urban teachers and the meaning of those problems for the teachers. The small set-up made it also possible to get more insight in why some problems did or did not occur in urban schools. It would be interesting, however, to conduct a large-scale quantitative study that compares the problems encountered by starting teachers at different types of urban schools, suburban schools and rural schools and that determines precisely which problems are specific to starting teachers at urban schools. Another limitation of our study is that we only asked teachers to reflect on their problems, and not others, like their principals. For further research, it would be interesting to collect data from multiple data sources and include principals. Finally, a limitation of this study is that we did not investigate the school organisational context, although we do know from previous research (e.g. Kardos and Moore Johnson 2007; Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko 2010) that this is an important factor determining whether beginning teachers experience problems. However, this study focused on a different dimension of context (urban vs. rural) from which is also known that it can have significant effects on beginning teachers' experiences (Knoblauch and Woolfolk Hoy 2008; Siwatu 2011).

Despite the limitations, this study provided an overview of some prominent problems faced by starting urban teachers. Previous research (Siwatu 2011) showed that it is important for the content of induction to be focused on the problems that teachers encounter in the specific context in which they work, in this case the urban educational context. This urban educational context needs to be further conceptualised, because within this context, there is a large variety of schools. This study is a first attempt that provides insight into the

problems of beginning teachers at different kinds of urban primary schools. The study underlines the value of a broader conceptualisation of teaching in urban schools. Teachers in schools in global cities experience various 'urban-related' problems that are related to the specific student population of their school. The results of this study can be used to design the content of induction programmes for beginning urban teachers. Further research should focus on the (design and) effects of induction programmes that specially focus on these urban challenges on teacher attrition and teaching quality in urban schools.

## Note

1. In the Netherlands, national funding is provided to all schools based on the number of pupils enrolled, but schools get more money for children from a lower SES than for children from a higher SES (Roeleveld et al. 2011).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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