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Supporting beginning teachers in urban environments

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CHAPTER 2

The problems of beginning teachers in urban primary schools

Abstract

This study examined the problems of beginning teachers in urban primary schools. Interviews were used to investigate the problems experienced by teachers at schools with advantaged, disadvantaged and mixed student populations. The results showed that beginning teachers experience several problems related to the urban environment. These problems were different for the different types of urban schools; teachers at disadvantaged schools primarily perceive problems related to the diverse student population, whereas teachers at advantaged and mixed schools experience problems such as dealing with highly educated parents and applying differentiation to adequately teach both the gifted and the lower performing students.

> **Keywords**: urban teaching, beginning teachers, induction, professional development; teacher retention

Introduction

As a consequence of continuous urbanisation, an increasing number of teachers is employed at schools in global cities. Social polarisation is typical for global cities: they are populated both by highly educated inhabitants with high incomes who live in relatively wealthy and safe neighbourhoods and by less educated inhabitants with low incomes who live in relatively poor and unsafe neighbourhoods (Van de Wouden & De Bruijne, 2002; Sassen, 2002). Social polarisation in global cities is reflected in the schools: there are schools that primarily educate children with a high socio-economic status and a native background ('advantaged schools') and schools that primarily educate children from a lower socio economic status and sometimes also from culturally diverse backgrounds ('disadvantaged schools'). In addition, 'mixed schools' can be found where the student population is a mix of advantaged and disadvantaged pupils (Hooge, 2008). Teachers in global cities can thus be confronted with either a more homogenous (deprived or advantaged) or a more heterogeneous student population.

Research showed that the dropout rate of beginning teachers in urban primary schools is relatively high (Ingersoll, 2003; Berndsen et al., 2004). Teaching in urban schools is difficult and challenging (Groulx, 2001; Smith & Smith, 2006), and a relatively high number of teachers tend to leave jobs at these schools and to leave the education profession in general. It appeared that teachers are often not well prepared for teaching in urban schools (Erskine- Cullen & Sinclair, 1996; Çelik & Amaç, 2012). This lack of preparation is understandable: an adequate 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.

Several studies showed that 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, & McGlamery, 2009; Lindgren, 2005; Krol et al., 2008). Research showed that it is important for these programmes to focus on the problems and support needs that teachers experience in the specific context in which they operate (Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012).

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 'disadvantaged' schools (see, for instance, Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade 2009). Little research has been performed, however, on the situation in advantaged or mixed urban schools, although these schools are also common and characteristic of global cities. Teachers must also be prepared and supported for the situations in these schools.

The central aim of this study was to identify the specific problems of beginning teachers at urban primary schools. We focused on the problems of teachers from three different types of urban primary schools (schools with advantaged, mixed and disadvantaged student populations). An exploratory study with in-depth semi-structured topic interviews was conducted with 15 beginning teachers who worked at an urban primary school in Amsterdam (the capital of the Netherlands) or Utrecht (one of the four major cities in the Netherlands).

Teaching in urban environments

In contrast to most studies on urban teaching, in this study, urban teaching is not only conceptualised as teaching in 'disadvantaged' schools where students come from families with a low socio-economic status and sometimes also culturally diverse backgrounds. We use 'urban teaching' to also refer to teaching in a global city. 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 represented both by highly educated individuals with extraordinarily high incomes who live in relatively wealthy, safe neighbourhoods and also by less educated individuals with low incomes who live in relatively poor, unsafe neighbourhoods. 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 de Wouden & De Bruijne, 2002; Sassen, 2002).

Social polarisation in global cities is often reflected in the schools. Schools in global cities are confronted with different types of student populations: there are schools that primarily serve children with a high socio economic status and a native background

(the so called 'advantaged schools') and schools with primarily children from a low socio economic status and sometimes also culturally diverse backgrounds (the so called 'disadvantaged schools'). 'Mixed schools' can also be found, where the student population is a mix of both disadvantaged and advantaged pupils (Hooge, 2008). In our study, we used a broad definition of urban teaching, namely, teaching in disadvantaged, mixed and advantaged schools, because these schools are characteristic of global cities and teachers must be equipped and supported for the situations in these different types of schools.

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, beginning urban teachers must address the challenges that are specifically related to teaching in an urban context.

Challenges for beginning teachers

One of the first and best-known studies about the challenges of beginning teachers is the literature review of Veenman (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, awareness of school policies and rules, insufficient preparation and spare time, the burden of clerical work and inadequate guidance and support. However, only a small fraction of the studies reviewed by Veenman specifically focused on primary schools. In addition, no distinction was made between the problems perceived by teachers at different types of schools, such as urban and non-urban schools. Because the studies were conducted between 1960 and 1984, it is unlikely that the same results would be found nowadays. However, Veenman's study still provides insight into the broad range of problems that beginning teachers could experience.

More 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 were also found in these studies (Bezzina 2006; De Jonge & Muijnck, 2002; Schuck et al., 2012). In addition, the problem of a high workload was acknowledged (Abbort, Moran, & Clarke, 2009). Again,

in the majority of these studies, no distinction was made between the problems of urban and non-urban teachers.

Challenges for beginning teachers in an urban context

The literature on urban teaching identified several challenges for beginning urban teachers. The focus in the literature was on schools with a disadvantaged student population. One important challenge that has been mentioned in various articles is that urban teachers are confronted with *cultural diversity* (Groulx, 2001; Erskine-Cullen & Sinclari, 1996). Urban teachers must 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 & Perkins, 2002; Zeichner, 2003). Teachers in urban schools are predominantly (European-American) middle-class females (Diffily & Perkins, 2002). The population of students that attend these urban schools, however, is much more diverse. In the US for example, many Hispanic or African-American families live in urban neighbourhoods and send their children to urban schools. Zeichner (2003) explains that this increasing gap between the backgrounds of the students and the teachers makes it difficult to teach at urban schools. Groulx (2001) argues that teachers need to develop the cultural competence to address the difficulties surrounding cultural diversity. Villegas and Lucas (2002) emphasise the importance of 'culturally sensitive teachers' who have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds; these teachers see resources for learning in their students rather than difficulties to overcome. According to Levine-Rasky (1998), beginning teachers have difficulties to fulfil expectations 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. These 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 (Kooy, 2006; McCombs & Quiat, 2004; Swanson Gehrke, 2005). Regarding differences in language development, second language learners are a major challenge for

urban teachers. This challenge is believed to be more common in urban schools because a higher percentage of families from ethnic minorities live in cities.. According to Swanson Gehrke (2005), urban teachers must also deal with students who are at risk of academic failure, because schools with many children from disadvantaged families have a higher number of at risk children.

Furthermore, increased *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 & Smith, 2006). Many teachers in Smith and Smith's (2006) study left the school or the teaching profession because of violence-induced stress. Teachers in an urban setting also must address the numerous factors that impact students' learning and development, including hunger, anger, fear, illness, conflict, and death (Swanson Gehrke, 2005).

To conclude, teaching in urban schools is, for a variety of reasons, difficult and challenging for teachers. Several challenges of teaching in an urban context are described in the literature on urban teaching. Nevertheless, the literature primarily addresses the situation in disadvantaged schools, not the situation in advantaged and mixed schools.

The present study

The aim of this study was to identify the specific problems of beginning teachers in urban primary schools. The central research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What are the problems that beginning teachers encounter in urban primary schools?

2. What problems are specific to urban schools with advantaged, mixed and disadvantaged student populations?

To answer these questions, an exploratory study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured topic interviews with 15 beginning teachers from Dutch urban primary schools. Although previous research identified several challenges for urban teachers, little is known about how the teachers themselves experience the urban challenges that they encounter. A qualitative research method was selected because we were interested in the perceived problems and the meaning of these problems for the teachers. We wanted to investigate which of the urban challenges identified in the literature were perceived to be real problems by the teachers. In addition, we wanted to investigate whether teachers in

urban schools experienced problems that were different from the challenges identified in the literature.

The study included teachers from 'disadvantaged' schools, 'more advantaged' schools and 'mixed' schools. Because the problems that teachers encounter are expected to be partially dependent on the types of students who they teach, teachers from schools with three types of populations were included to ensure a good representation of the diversity of urban schools.

Context of the present study

All of the participants in the study were starting teachers in urban schools in two large cities of the Netherlands, namely, Amsterdam and Utrecht. Although the number of inhabitants in these cities is not high compared to cities in other countries (approximately 780,000 in Amsterdam and 320,000 in Utrecht), Amsterdam and Utrecht are, often as part of the Randstad, considered to be global cities. The economic activities in Amsterdam consist of financial services, the leisure economy, transport and communication (Van de Wouden & De Bruijne, 2002). In Utrecht, economic activities consist of financial services and computer and information technology (Van de Wouden & De Bruijne, 2002). Amsterdam and Utrecht are also characterised by social polarisation. In these two cities, there has been a steady outflow of the middle class to the suburbs (Van de Wouden & De Bruijne, 2002). Schools with advantaged, mixed and disadvantaged student populations are also typical of Amsterdam and Utrecht.

Method

Participants

In total, 15 teachers participated in this study. The characteristics of the participating teachers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the teachers

Starting teachers at urban primary schools (n=15)	
Sex	
Male	0
Female	15
Years working as a teacher	
First year	7
Second year	3
Third to fifth year	5
School population type	
Disadvantaged	5
Mixed	5
Advantaged	5
Age	
20-30 years	12
30+	3
Class (ranges from 1-8)	
Lower grades	6
Middle grades	6
Higher grades	3

Variables and instruments

The interviews consisted of two parts. In the first part, the interviewer asked open questions about the teachers' problems. 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.

The interview continued by delving into each of the problems that the interviewee raised by discussing whether the teacher thought that the problem was related to teaching in an urban school. In the second part of the interview, the challenges that were identified in the international literature (see table 2) were discussed.

Table 2

The challenges for teaching in urban contexts that are identified in the literature

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Cultural diversity

1. Dealing with **children** from a **different** culture, with a different background and values and who speak a different language **than I** do and than the people I grew up with.
2. Dealing with **parents** from a **different** culture, with a different background and values and who speak a different language **than I** do and than the people I grew up with.
3. **Teaching Dutch** to children who were raised speaking a different language.

Differences

4. Dealing with a **diversity** of cultures, but also other **differences between children** in terms of character, behaviour, norms & values and attitude.
5. Adapting to the differences in cognitive development and language development between children; being able to **differentiate** education.
6. **Paying sufficient attention** to the students at risk of academic failure.

Violence and poverty

7. Being able to handle **violence** or an **unsafe** atmosphere at school or in the neighbourhood of the school.
8. Being able to deal with the fact that **some students experience particular circumstances** such as hunger, fear, illness and aggression on a daily basis at home.

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 recognised a challenge and perceived this challenge as a problem, the interviewer asked for the relatedness of the problem to urban schools. For the challenges that the interviewee did not encounter, the interviewee was asked to explain why such scenarios were not a problem.

Analysis

Content analysis, as described by Huberman and Miles (1994), was the primary method of analysis used in this study. 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. 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 topic 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.

Validity and Reliability

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 member check. The participants were asked to confirm the authenticity of the interview; 13 out of 15 performed the confirmation. The two other participants did not respond to the e-mail.

The outcome of the labelling was audited using a procedure in which the codes of one (randomly chosen) scored interview were checked and discussed in a peer review by two experienced researchers (Kvale, 2007). One of the authors was the coder of this interview. One of the other authors examined the different fragments and codes used by the coder and evaluated whether she could agree with the assigned codes. The coding of the focus on 'problems' showed a 93 % agreement. The codes for the 'problems' were discussed until agreement was established and coding was adjusted to match the outcome of this discussion.

Results

Problems

The problems raised by the teachers themselves will be examined first; afterwards, the occurrence of the eight challenges from the literature (see table 3) will be discussed (section 3.1.2).

Problems raised by the teachers

Table 3 displays the problems that the 15 teachers raised during the first part of the interview.

Table 3

Problems raised by the teachers

	School type		
Problem	Advantaged	Mixed	Disadvantaged
Frequently mentioned problems			
High workload, significant stress	2	3	3
No guidance & support at school	3	3	1
Contact with parents	4	1	0
Addressing personal insecurity	2	2	1
Less frequently mentioned problems			
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
Occasionally mentioned problems			
Children's violent physical behaviour	0	0	1
Keeping track of all students	0	0	1
Developing and maintaining personal vision	0	1	0
Working together with a 'duo'-colleague	0	0	1
Proving yourself to the children	0	1	0
Insight into the social and emotional development of children	0	1	0
Registration of the development of children with special needs	1	1	0
Inadequate support at school for children with special needs	1	1	0

High workload and significant stress

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

> *"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 worked so hard; I have never been so tired in my entire life."*

The problem of a high workload occurred at advantaged, mixed and disadvantaged schools. However, the causes behind the high workload appear, to a certain extent, to be different according to the different school types: teachers at the disadvantaged schools mentioned that they experienced significant pressure and stress because they had difficulty meeting the standards of the educational inspectorate, whereas the teachers at the advantaged schools experienced significant pressure and stress because they had to work with critical and demanding parents. A teacher at a disadvantaged school explained the situation as follows:

'This is such a 'black' school, the school was supposed to close, so we had to work very hard to keep it open. The results of the children really had to be improved... That puts pressure on you as a teacher; you had to get those children on a higher level.'

A teacher at an advantaged school declared:

> *"The parents of this school prefer weekly conversations. The parents think that they know as much as you do as a teacher, or even more. And they do not hesitate to tell you! Like "[my child] is behind in reading, what are you doing about it?" The parents are very demanding and want you to show that you are doing it right."*

Several teachers who experienced this problem did believe that the high workload is a particular problem for teachers in urban schools. They noted there is significant pressure on teachers in urban schools because they must deal with very critical parents and/or a large number of children who need extra guidance and support.

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, the teachers at the disadvantaged schools rarely mentioned the problem of 'no guidance and support', whereas the majority of the teachers at the advantaged and mixed schools experienced this problem. The teachers mentioned during the interviews that the reason for this difference could be that the disadvantaged schools receive more money from the government (because of their deprived student population) in comparison to the advantaged and mixed schools disadvantaged schools[1]; thus, the teachers at these schools have more opportunities for guidance and support. Another reason for the additional support could be that the principals at disadvantaged schools are more aware than the principals at advantaged and mixed schools of how difficult it is to be a beginning teacher at their school.

Three teachers stated that the problem could be related to teaching in an urban school. According to these teachers, schools in urban environments are very often large schools that must manage many complex issues; consequently, there is not enough time to establish strong support structures for beginning teachers. However, to help beginning teachers to manage the complexity of urban teaching, it very important that they receive good support.

Contact with parents

The third issue, 'contact with parents', was a problem for five teachers. Interestingly, almost all of these teachers were from advantaged schools where the 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 the teachers at the

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[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).

advantaged schools, there are many parents in urban environments, in particular at advantaged schools such as theirs. The teachers at these schools framed the problem in a negative way; they described the parents at their schools as being very critical of the teachers, thereby placing heavy demands on them. Most of the parents have only one or two children and have very high expectations for their children. These parents want their children to achieve the highest levels of secondary education, and therefore the parents pressure the teachers. Because the parents are generally highly educated, older than the teachers and very demanding, parental contact is very difficult for the teachers. One teacher described her situation as follows:

> *"I have difficulties with the contact with parents, especially with bad news conversations. I think that this problem is related [to urban teaching], 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, contrarily the teachers at the advantaged schools, none of the teachers at the disadvantaged schools mentioned the problem of parental contact. However, during the second part of the interviews, when the interviewer explicitly asked if the teacher recognised the problem of parental contact, several teachers from the disadvantaged schools did mention that they recognised the problem. Nevertheless, the fact that the differences between the school types in the first part of the interviews were so high and that none of the teachers at the disadvantaged school mentioned this problem independently are indications that parental contact is in particular a problem of teachers in advantaged schools.

Addressing personal insecurity

The fourth problem, 'addressing personal insecurity', was a problem addressed by five of the teachers. The problem of 'insecurity' occurred in advantaged, mixed and disadvantaged schools. The majority of the teachers who experienced this problem indicated that there was a relationship between their insecurity and teaching in an urban school; the teachers at the advantaged schools mentioned that critical parents led to greater insecurity, whereas the teacher at the disadvantaged school explained that the student population (with many students from ethnic minorities) made her more insecure.

According to the teachers at the mixed schools, this problem was not related to teaching in an urban school.

Less frequently mentioned problems

Only three of the remaining problems are relevant enough to discuss in detail. The other problems were either not perceived as being very difficult to manage by the teachers, or were not associated with teaching at urban schools at all.

One problem that, according to three teachers, was hard to address is 'Dealing children who require special attention'. The teachers related this problem to teaching in an urban school. They stated that more children with behavioural or learning disorders live in cities and thereby attend urban schools.

Another problem that, according to two teachers, was very much related to teaching in urban schools was addressing 'children's home situation'. One teacher described this issue as follows:

> *"I think there are more problems, in neighbourhoods like this one in particular ... Yes, more poverty, people who live with their whole family in very small apartments, alcohol and drugs, also children who are mistreated."*

Furthermore, a problem that was hard to manage according to four teachers, was a 'lack of structure and information in the organisation'. The teachers who experienced the problem explained that their schools were badly organised: often there was no clear information for the teachers about what they had to teach, no learning goals were established, sometimes there were no school-wide methods, no clear school policies, and no learning trajectories[2].

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[2] This problem could occur, because schools in the Netherlands have a high level of autonomy. Dutch primary schools are fully responsible for the organisation of their teaching, learning, personnel and materials (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Challenges found in the scientific literature that were recognised by the teachers

Table 4 shows the eight challenges found in the international scientific literature (for a more elaborate description, see table 2) and the number of teachers who recognised and perceived these challenges as problems, grouped by school type.

Table 4

International challenges recognised as problems by the teachers

		School type	
Problem	Advantaged	Mixed	Disadvantaged
Cultural Diversity			
1. Cultural background of children	0	0	3
2. Cultural background of parents	1	1	3
3. Second language learners	0	2	2
Differences			
4. Diversity	3	0	1
5. Adaptive education	3	2	3[a]
6. Children at risk	4	4	3
Violence and urban circumstances			
7. Violence, insecurity	2	0	3
8. Children's home situation	0	2	5

N = 15 (5 per school type)

[a]   Problem was only discussed with three of the teachers from this group

Cultural background of children

The first problem, 'dealing with children from a different culture, background and values and who speak a different language than I do', was perceived as a problem by three of the five teachers from the disadvantaged schools. These teachers all believed that this problem was related to teaching in urban schools because these schools are often located in neighbourhoods inhabited by many families from a different background than most teachers. The teachers at the advantaged schools did not experience this issue as a problem because they 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 or they specialised in this topic because they found it so interesting. An explanation for the fact that the teachers at the disadvantaged schools experienced this issue as being problematic more often than the teachers at the mixed schools could be that the teachers at the disadvantaged schools were not as well prepared for this issue by their teacher training education than the teachers at the mixed schools; most of the teachers at the mixed schools mentioned that they received appropriate preparation through modules about cultural diversity at their teacher training education and through their internships at primary schools with a culturally diverse student population, whereas most of the teachers at the disadvantaged schools explained that they were not well prepared for this issue.

The cultural background of parents

The second problem, 'dealing with parents from a different culture, background and values and who speak a different language than I do', was recognised as a problem by five teachers. In contrast to the first part of the interview – where almost all of the teachers at the advantaged schools mentioned the problem of parental contact – here, only one teacher at an advantaged school recognised the problem. The reason for this difference is that in the second part of the interviews, the problem of parental contact was explicitly related (by the interviewer) to the different culture and background of the parents, while the teachers in the first part of the interviews mentioned that dealing with parents at advantaged schools was more related to the extreme involvement and demands of the parents. The majority of the teachers at the advantaged schools explicitly stated that they did not recognise the challenges of this problem because they had no experience with parents from different cultural backgrounds at their schools, but that they did have trouble with highly educated and critical parents.

The teachers who experienced a problem from parental contact at the two other types of schools stated that the problem was primarily caused by a language barrier because the parents did not speak Dutch. The other teachers from these school types also had to deal with this issue, but they did not find it hard to do so.

Second language learners

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 disadvantaged schools. The teachers at the advantaged schools indicated that they did not experience this problem because they had few students with a different mother tongue.

According to the teachers who experienced this difficulty, there is a relationship between the problem and teaching in an urban school. The teachers explained that more non-Dutch people live in cities, and therefore urban schools enrol non-Dutch children more often than other schools. Most of the teachers at the mixed and disadvantaged schools who did not experience this problem stated that they have a good method for addressing language deficiencies at their school. Several of these teachers indicated that they found managing this area to be one of the parts of their jobs that they enjoyed.

Dealing with diversity

The fourth problem, 'dealing with (a diversity of cultures, but also other) differences between children in terms of character, behaviour, norms & values and attitude' was recognised and perceived as a problem by three teachers at advantaged schools and one teacher at a disadvantaged school.

The majority of the teachers at the advantaged schools explained that they also had difficulties with dealing with diversity. One teacher mentioned that, in particular, she had problems with the different characters of children in her class. Another teacher stated that she had problems with articulate children and differences in concentration between children. According to two of the three teachers at the advantaged schools 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: a lack of concentration is more common in big cities because children in big cities are confronted with many impulses and therefore have more difficulty concentrating at school.

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 or they

simply found it easy to address differences between children. The teachers at the disadvantaged 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 & values, attitudes and cultural backgrounds of the children.

Adaptive education

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

Most teachers did not believe that this problem 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 that 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 pedagogy used in the school and the organisation of the school made it easy for these teachers to provide adaptive education. Other teachers mentioned that they had developed a good system to deal with differences themselves, and therefore had no troubles with this issue.

Children at risk

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 problem occurred more often at the advantaged and mixed schools than at the disadvantaged schools. The teachers at the advantaged 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.

The teachers at the advantaged and mixed schools experienced not only problems with differentiation for the children at risk, but also with differentiation upwards. One teacher of a mixed school stated this problem as follows:

> *"I do think this is a problem, but not only for the pupils at risk, but also for the very good pupils. 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.

Teachers at the disadvantaged schools who had no troubles with this issue mentioned that they had smaller classes and received extra guidance:

> *"No, this is no problem for me because I have a class of only 16 students. There*
> *is a method that always provides extra instruction for students who are slightly*
> *above or below the average. Besides, many things are organised to give pupils extra individual*
> *guidance."*

Violence

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 advantaged schools and three teachers at a school with a population consisting of children from ethnic minorities. The teachers at the disadvantaged 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 two teachers at the advantaged schools indicated that they did recognise the problem of violence and an unsafe atmosphere, but they added to this that the problem only occurred occasionally at their school.

The majority of the teachers who recognised the problem 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 that did not experience this problem either worked at a school in a very safe neighbourhood or worked at a school with good policies or instructional methods to address violence among students.

The children's' home situation

The eighth topic, 'Being able 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 recognised and perceived as a problem by all of the teachers at disadvantaged 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 this teacher to emotionally address the fact that these children live their daily lives under these circumstances. The other teachers told a similar story. Teachers at the advantaged schools mentioned that they did not have trouble with this issue simply because the problem did not occur in their school or its neighbourhood. Almost all of their pupils were from rich, highly educated parents.

Conclusion

This study identified several problems that beginning teachers encounter in urban primary schools. The most prominent problems that the teachers identified were a high workload, significant stress and inadequate guidance and support. Other frequently mentioned problems were contact with parents (both highly educated and critical parents and non-native parents) and dealing with their personal insecurity. With regards to the problems identified in the literature as 'urban school problems', two issues were primarily recognised by the teachers as being 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.

This study showed that teachers at advantaged and mixed schools experience problems that are, to a certain extent, different from the problems of urban teachers at disadvantaged schools. One major problem for the teachers from the advantaged and mixed schools was that they had difficulty applying differentiation to adequately teach both the better performing students and the students who are 'at risk of academic failure'. In addition, these teachers felt that they receive inadequate guidance and support from their schools. The main problem mentioned by the teachers from the advantaged schools

was that they had to deal with very demanding and critical parents. The teachers at disadvantaged schools primarily experienced problems that were related to their diverse student population, such as dealing with cultural diversity. The teachers from the disadvantaged schools recognised all of the challenges mentioned in the literature on urban teaching, whereas some of these challenges were not recognised by the teachers at the advantaged or mixed schools. This result is not surprising because this research primarily addresses teaching in disadvantaged schools.

The teachers believed that several of the problems discussed in this study were related to teaching in an urban school. The teachers identified the following characteristics of cities as being connected with these problems: the multicultural nature of cities; the large size of urban schools; the greater number of families from a higher economic status or, in contrast, of economically deprived families and multi-problem families; a greater number of non-Dutch speaking families and a greater number of children with learning difficulties or problem behaviour on the one hand and of gifted children on the other. Furthermore, some teachers noticed that the educational inspectorate more closely monitored urban schools. These teachers experienced this intensive monitoring as a source of extra stress rather than of support.

Discussion

This research aimed to contribute to our knowledge regarding teaching in urban schools. The results of this study identified several problems that teachers encounter in urban primary schools. Many of these problems were general problems that could also be experienced by non-urban teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers who participated in this study experienced these problems as 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, 1987; Schuck et al., 2012). However, in this study, the problem specifically referred to the extreme involvement, demands and expectations of parents (at the advantaged schools) and to the diverse backgrounds of parents (at the disadvantaged schools). Thus, urban teachers appear to experience specific 'urban' problems. However, there were no teachers from outside of the city in our sample, so we cannot make a proper comparison.

Another important finding from this study is that there are differences between the problems teachers experience at different types of urban schools. The teachers from the disadvantaged schools recognised the urban challenges that were described in the literature on teaching in urban schools (e.g., Diffily & Perkins, 2002; Smith & Smith, 2006). However, the teachers at advantaged and mixed schools experience problems that are to a certain extent different from the problems of urban teachers from disadvantaged schools. It is important that the initial teacher education addresses the problems that teachers might experience in urban schools. However, because these problems are so diverse, teacher education cannot fully prepare teachers for all of the different types of problems; thus, it is also important that the urban schools themselves provide good support for their 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 study has some limitations, and more research into urban teaching is needed. First, this study was a small-scale research project and the results cannot be generalised. The small-scale design did make it possible to obtain in-depth information about the perceived problems of urban teachers and the meaning of those problems for the teachers. It would be interesting, however, to conduct a large-scale quantitative study that compares the problems encountered by starting teachers at urban schools, suburban schools and rural schools and that determines precisely which problems are specific to starting teachers at urban schools.

Despite the limitations, this study provided an overview of some prominent problems faced by starting urban teachers in different types of urban schools. Previous research (Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012) showed that it is important for the content of professional development and induction programmes to be focused on the problems that teachers encounter in the specific context in which they work. This study provided insight into the problems of beginning teachers at urban primary schools. The results of

this study could be used to develop adequate preparation and support for beginning urban teachers.

This study underlines the value of a broader conceptualisation of teaching in urban schools. Teachers in schools in global cities experience different types of problems depending on the student population of their school.