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New Teachers Say They Are Ill Prepared for Classroom Diversity and Special-Needs Students

By PAULA WASLEY

Many new elementary- and secondary-school teachers feel that their training left them unprepared for the challenges of working in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms or teaching children with special needs, according to a new report by **Public Agenda**, a public-policy research group.

Public Agenda, together with the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, a research center backed by the U.S. Department of Education, surveyed 641 first-year teachers about their views on teacher training, professional development, and retention.

The study found that while new teachers generally felt positively about their overall preparation, they identified gaps between teacher training and coping with diverse classrooms and special-needs students.

While 76 percent of those surveyed said that their training programs had covered strategies for teaching racially and ethnically diverse groups of students, only 39 percent said that the training they received had helped them in such classrooms.

Anxiety and Class?

Curiously, in a trend that researchers labeled "suburban angst," the report showed that teachers who worked in affluent communities felt less prepared and were more anxious about

teaching diverse groups of students than their colleagues at schools in less affluent areas.

While most teachers surveyed said they had received training in working in diverse classrooms, new teachers in "high needs" schools were far more likely to say their training had helped them. In fact almost half of teachers in high-needs areas felt their diversity training had helped them a lot, as compared with less than one-third of the teachers in upscale school districts who said their preparation had been useful.

The results suggest that teachers in affluent schools are not prepared for the diversity they will encounter, the report says. "Contrary to the popular view that suburban schools are not racially integrated," it says, "suburban teachers in focus groups mention that they increasingly find themselves with a wide range of populations from cultures from Asia, Latin America, the Asian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East."

Preparing for Special-Needs Students

Rookie teachers also said their training to teach children with special needs had been insufficient. Although 82 percent of the respondents had received instruction in teaching children with special needs, only 42 percent felt their course work adequately prepared them to

teach the large numbers of special-needs students in their classes. This gap is particularly troublesome, the report says, because all but 5 percent of those surveyed reported having some children with special needs in their classroom.

The two complaints contrast with the generally positive assessments teachers gave of their preparation over all, described by most as comprehensive and useful.

Survey respondents reported that their teacher-education programs had covered a wide number of topics, from subject-specific instructional techniques to classroom-management methods, and that, for the most part, the training had left them confident in applying what they learned in the classroom. For example, 92 percent said they had received training in children's cognitive, emotional, and psychological development, and roughly half thought that training was helpful. Seventy-eight percent said they had received instruction in maintaining discipline and managing a classroom, and 58 percent said that training had been useful.

Most of the teachers surveyed felt they would encounter fewer difficulties in smaller classes. When presented with a list of options for improving teacher quality and student learning, the greatest number of respondents—76

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percent—said that reducing class size would be effective in improving both. Sixty-three percent said that better preparation for teachers in adapting their instruction to meet the needs of a diverse classroom would be effective.

The report, "Teaching in Changing Times," is the third and final report in a series commissioned by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality on the work conditions, training, and experiences of elementary- and secondary-school teachers. Earlier studies focused on the challenges for new teachers in high schools and middle schools, and the experiences of teachers who entered the profession through alternative programs other than traditional teacher-training programs.

The full series, "Lessons Learned: New Teachers Talk About Their Jobs, Challenges, and Long-Range Plans," is available on Public Agenda's Web site.