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AN URBAN TEACHER FIELD-BASED PREPARATION PROGRAM THAT WORKS

Susan Thompson, Lana Smith and Dennie Smith

Introduction

As the demand for well-qualified teachers who can teach in complex, urban settings intensifies, the traditional structures and approaches to teacher preparation programs come into question. Teachers are faced with educating students who have diverse needs and come from diverse backgrounds. In order to ensure success for all students, teachers must be well prepared to face the challenges of the 21st century classrooms. Goodlad (1990) states, "Few matters are more important than the quality of the teachers in our nation's schools" (p. xi). Goodlad writes that while excellent teachers necessarily do not create excellent schools, ill-prepared teachers do nothing to contribute to successful schools. Arturo Pacheco (2000), in his address to the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, echoes Goodlad's conclusions and reminds teacher educators "better teachers lead to better schools" (p. 8).

Sarason, Davidson, and Blatt (1986) reveal that there are deficiencies in the traditional teacher preparation programs using methods courses to develop knowledge about teaching. They assert that emphasis is often placed on how to teach subject matter and that preservice teachers are rarely given opportunities to try out the methods. When given such opportunities, the experience is often too short and supervision is minimal. Finally, the authors suggest that their data show that there is little relevance between the information taught in the methods courses and teaching in a classroom with children of varying achievement levels.

The problems of recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers for demanding urban teaching situations is a challenge for every institution that offers teacher education programs. The University of Memphis, College of Education, has joined a coalition of 17 public research universities in the United States to address these issues. Two of the goals of the college are to provide more intensive and authentic field-based experiences for the preparation of teachers in urban schools and to provide more effective support for teacher candidates through mentoring from successful urban teachers. The college has tackled these challenges by adopting as its initial focus the improvement of its teacher education program for the purposes of ensuring (1) a diverse and high-quality approach to teacher preparation that involves solid K-12/postsecondary partnerships, strong field experience, and good support for new teachers; and (2) that teacher recruitment and retention policies would target the areas of greatest need and the teachers most likely to staff them successfully. In an effort to offer a comprehensive teacher preparation program aligned with college goals, faculty in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Memphis scrutinized their program. The Elementary Education Program was redesigned and emerged after substantial changes as the Integrative Studies Major leading to a Bachelor of Science in Education (B.S. Ed.) degree.

The Research Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teacher candidates, mentor teachers, cooperating teachers, and university professors about the Integrative Studies Major leading to elementary teaching licensure in early and middle grades (K-8). The Integrative Studies Program replaces the previous Elementary Education Major program with more field-based coursework (taught on-site in a Professional Development School [PDS]), an integrated methods block class of 12 hours the semester before student teaching (designated as an

“internship”), and student teaching in the same professional development school (for at least 7 or 8 weeks of the 15-week student teaching experience). Data regarding the perceptions of the teacher candidates involved in this program, the perceptions of the mentor teachers (working with interns during block semester), and cooperating teachers (working with student teachers) regarding the performance of the teacher candidates, and the perceptions of the university professors teaching the Integrative Studies Major were gathered and analyzed for program evaluation purposes. In addition to the formative evaluation data aimed at determining how the program is functioning and how it can be improved to better achieve its goals, data also were gathered and examined to determine the effectiveness of the teacher education program in helping prospective teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to improve their teaching. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Integrative Studies Major program?
2. What did teacher candidates find beneficial during their internship and student teaching experiences in the Integrative Studies Major program?
3. What experiences did mentor and cooperating teachers believe better-prepared teacher candidates to become successful beginning teachers?
4. From both preservice and inservice teachers’ perceptions, how well does this teacher preparation program prepare teacher candidates to begin a career in teaching?
5. What are the trends in performance on the Praxis Exam over time for elementary licensure teacher candidates?
6. Do rates of program completion change over time?
7. Do rates of retention in the profession improve over time?

Methodology

This study had a qualitative research design with quantitative Likert Scale data included, using open-ended surveys and taped focus group interviews as the data collection format for

answering research questions 1-4 (see above). According to Merriam (1998), "Meaning is embedded in the peoples' experiences" (p. 6). Seidman (1998) reports that at the root of the research "is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). Since this study answers questions related to the unique experiences of teacher candidates and mentor and cooperating teachers participating in the Integrative Studies program and will attempt to understand what these experiences mean to them, it is appropriate to center this inquiry in qualitative research methodology. To understand the participants' perceptions, we used naturalistic inquiry and open-ended interviewing. Data answering research questions 5 and 6 were extrapolated from the university's database. Data collection pertaining to question 7 is ongoing.

Respondents for this study included a nonrandom sample of 27 teacher candidates, approximately 50 elementary teachers, 6 university supervisors, and 4 university professors. The students were enrolled in the Integrative Studies Major Professional Education Block for fall 2001 (referred to as internship semester) and in student teaching during the spring 2002 semester. Teachers were employed in schools where the interns and student teachers were placed. University professors taught in the Integrative Block Major program. University supervisors (including some who taught the block courses) observed and evaluated participants during their student teaching. Participants completed written surveys at the end of the fall semester and again at the end of the student teaching semester (see Appendix A). In addition, a randomly selected group of teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and cooperating teachers participated in focus group interviews at the end of the block semester and again at the end of the student teaching semester. A constant comparative data analysis method that involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences was used in this study

(Merriam, 1998). Data were unitized into the smallest meaning units, coded, grouped together for similarities, assigned category names, and then examined and compared for recurring patterns and emerging themes. This process was repeated as each interview was completed and all information was merged to provide a comprehensive view of the experience from the participants' perspectives.

All surveys were anonymous and coded for organizational purposes only. Personal interviews were conducted at a place convenient to all parties. Audiotape recordings were utilized for accuracy purposes and to enhance field notes. Participants granted written permission to be interviewed (See Appendix B). Interviews were treated as conversations in which respondents were asked to describe their perceptions of the Integrative Studies Major program and their experiences in the program. Interviews were open-ended so that the respondents could frame their answers in their personal style. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and participation in the study was voluntary. All responses were coded for confidentiality and kept in a secured location.

Discussion and Recommendations

Data were analyzed for evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, benefits and preparation characteristics of this teacher education program. Data were examined to determine the effectiveness of the program and to assist in improving the program. The collected data addressed seven questions.

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Integrative Studies Major Program?

Interns were very enthusiastic about participating in this program. They reported the extensive classroom experience as most valuable to them. They also believed that because of the time they spent in one school, they became familiar with school routine and school culture.

Another strength of the program was the support the interns received from their peers in the block cohort, as well as an expert team of university professors and classroom professionals. Moving into their student teaching semester, the candidates' perspectives shifted somewhat to place the peer interaction within their cohort as the most important strength of the program. Just as with internship, the candidates valued the hands-on experiences and the extensive hours of working in the classroom. Student teachers also found value in their knowledge of instructional strategies and their ability to write cohesive, workable lesson plans.

The teacher candidates were realistic about the weaknesses of the program. As students still taking coursework, the interns found their course load overwhelming at times. They characterized some of the work as busy work and did not see the connection to teaching until much later during their student teaching semester. Because of the closeness and intense relationship interns had with university professors, (which was not typical of most of their previous university classes), they had difficulty dealing with the university professors' individual personalities. Because the 12 semester hours block class was one class in their perception, they were confused by different professors' requirements and personal styles. Some interns believed that the program was too time consuming and interfered with their personal lives. As student teachers, these same candidates were able to be more reflective and look at the program less personally.

2. What did teacher candidates find beneficial during their internship and student teaching experiences in the Integrative Studies Major Program?

Participants found many benefits in this program. Interns developed an understanding of what it means to be a teacher through their experiences in the school. Candidates learned about the nature of students, how they learn, and what motivates them. They found it beneficial to work in a school setting on a regular basis and to work closely with experienced teachers.

Student teachers also developed strong relationships with their cooperating teachers and respected them for their expertise. The Integrative Studies Major program removed the limits of more traditional teacher education program. Candidates found it beneficial to have a variety of experiences throughout internship and student teaching and not be limited to just observations. Another benefit of the program was the cooperative and collaborative nature of working with peers over the course of one year. Teacher candidates were able to try out instructional strategies and classroom management techniques to find what worked well and what did not work. This was a benefit over being “told about it in class” and expected to accept the information as true and to remember it for future reference.

3. What experiences did mentor and cooperating teachers believe better-prepared teacher candidates to become successful beginning teachers?

Mentor teachers and cooperating teachers perceived that this program better prepared teacher candidates to become successful beginning teachers. Mentors and cooperating teachers believed that involving candidates in the planning process was beneficial. Candidates worked with teams of teachers to plan lessons. They learned how to plan lessons that allowed students to be successful. In addition, candidates were able to experiment with lesson plans, teach them, reflect upon them afterwards, and grow in understanding of intricacies of planning and implementing a successful lesson.

4. From both preservice and inservice teachers’ perceptions, how well does this teacher preparation program prepare teacher candidates to begin a career in teaching?

All participants of this program believed that the teacher candidates were well prepared to begin a career in teaching. Inservice teachers found the preservice teachers enthusiastic and energized about teaching. They were organized and prepared.

At the present time, data are not available to answer the remaining three questions posed by this study: What are the trends in performance on the Praxis Exam over time for elementary licensure teacher candidates?; Do rates of program completion change over time? And, Do rates of retention in the profession improve over time? However, mechanisms for collecting the data and monitoring it over time have been designed, are presently in place, and will be followed for future trends.

Program Modifications and Improvements: Summary Impressions .

Most of the suggestions for program modification concerned (a) improved interaction between university and school personnel, (b) more direct connections and follow-through between methods instruction, classroom experience, and student teaching placements, and (c) closer alignment to content knowledge expected to be taught, especially at early levels in reading and in upper levels of other content areas.

There is obviously great need for strong leadership in the implementation of the new Integrative Studies Program in order to bring about improvements in the program that will continue to build strong teachers for the future. Schools selected for housing the program must have whole-school teacher commitment and high levels of professionalism in helping the young and inexperienced learn what they need to know to be successful teachers. One student expressed this concern by saying, “A struggling school can’t help us. This program needs to be in strong schools where teachers are having success.” She continued by saying, “I also learned from this program that I won’t be happy teaching where teachers don’t get along or they don’t work together. I like working with a team and not every school has this spirit.” Another student commented, “We were given a mission in this program—to change what teaching is. I think we want to do that, and we think we can do it, but we know, also, that we are not ready to be a

‘leader’ yet. We are going to need support in these first years to get there.” These comments seem to point to the importance of selecting schools for placing the program where environments are supportive and conducive to collaboration. They also point to the increasing problem of recruiting and retaining teachers in schools where environments are not as positive. Thus, ways of strengthening the mentoring aspect of the program should continue to be explored and developed not only in the final year of preparation for becoming a teacher, but also in the first years of developing into a teacher.

University professors must continue to examine what they are teaching in order to better align methods with content and work collaboratively with all groups. They also must be committed to “following through” with students and giving them feedback on their performance in the classroom and not just on written assignments or portfolios. Coursework prior to the block semester (e.g., reading and special education courses) and content of courses students take in their general education, as well as other professional preparation courses, needs to be continually examined for ways of creating closer alignment with what elementary and middle school teachers, as well as students, are expected to know and be able to do.

Forming strong liaisons and building shared commitment between the University and school sites, as well as adequately preparing the university professors, schools, and teachers for delivery of the program seems a challenging task, but emerged from the discussion with the students as areas of priority for continued improvement of the program. The students’ levels of enthusiasm for becoming teachers and their confidence levels in assuming their professional roles was clearly evident throughout the interview and indicates that there is much promise through the Integrative Studies Program for increased recruitment and retention of teachers into the teaching profession.

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