PREPARING URBAN TEACHERS: EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES OF TEACHER CANDIDATES ON THEIR QUEST TO BECOMING URBAN SCHOOL TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

A commitment to high quality urban education means preparing teachers who are ready to meet those demands successfully. The research examines the factors that support and challenge teacher candidates who are themselves in a program located in an urban setting, and are primarily of color and/or from lower socioeconomic households as they prepare to: a) complete state certification and other licensing requirements; b) attain degrees in education, and c) become effective educators in inclusive urban schools. It is important to note the relevance of conducting research with our teacher candidate population. The teacher candidates we prepare for urban schools are frequently underprepared academically, and they face an onslaught of economic and other hardships, which must be navigated, interrupted and addressed in order for them to effectively serve high needs urban schools. Thus, there are unique factors and challenges, which must be taken into consideration with reference to their preparation. Findings revealed that faculty of the education department were most supportive, while funding and class load were the greatest challenges. Our teacher candidates felt ready to begin working with students of color, English language learners and students with disabilities.

Field of Research: Teacher preparation, urban schools, teacher candidates of color

1. Introduction

The context of the urban setting creates a challenging environment (Ginwright, 2004; Weiner, 2000), as there are issues of “limited school funding, more inexperienced and underqualified teachers, greater teacher turn-over, and more students assigned to special classes and categorical programs endemic in urban schools” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 233). Urban schools have their own unique set of challenges that cannot be ignored, and it is crucial that we understand the needs of students in urban settings (Ginwright, 2004; Howey, 1999; Johnson, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1999; MacDonald, 1999; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). This research adds that we must also understand the needs of teachers preparing to work in these settings. In other words, what does it take to ensure that teachers are ready to work with students in socially, politically and economically challenging environments? Weiner (2000) notes “the most salient aspect of urban teaching is that urban teachers must be able to accommodate the greatest diversity of student needs under conditions that continually subvert their efforts to personalize and individualize education (p. 371).

New York City Department of Education’s annual report (2011) reveals that 39.3% of its student body is Latino/a, 29.9% African descent/Black, 14.9% Asian and 14.3% White. Additionally, 15% of the students are English Language Learners (ELL), 16% receive services for special needs, and 72.4% receive free or reduced lunch, a designation for lower socioeconomic students. Unfortunately, schools with high populations of students of color such as those in urban areas are often ill equipped
to meet the needs of their student populations (Capella-Santana, 2003; Chizhik, 2003). Given the challenges our research sought to explore the factors that would contribute to preparing teachers who are effective in urban settings.

2. Urban School Reform

Any commitment to P-12 reforms means commitment to reform at our own College. In order to ensure that urban youth receive high quality education (Howey, 1999), we must examine the preparation of those who will educate young people in those settings. Thus, we begin with our own programs, and we choose to have the voices and experiences of our candidates to inform our practice and programmatic changes, instead of following traditional methods that exclude the people they serve. Urban teacher preparation calls for research that examines some of the age-old issues that have not received the attention deserved, such as how economic and political conditions influence teachers and teaching (Chizhik, 2003) while informing teacher education programs of the needs of teacher candidates of color and/or candidates from lower socioeconomic households.

3. Role of Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation plays a pivotal role in teachers’ socialization and pedagogy (Achinstein, Ogawa & Speiglman, 2004; Williamson & Hellison, 1992); thus, it can be viewed as a period of initiation and growing into the profession (Head, 1992). It is imperative that we successfully prepare those intending to become teachers, particularly teachers of students with high needs. It is crucial for schools and colleges of education to become more proactive by setting high standards to produce candidates with adequate depth and breadth of content knowledge, as well as pedagogical skills to become effective teachers. If we desire a more diverse highly qualified teaching population, we must examine our programs and be prepared to make changes to our courses and programs as well as make institutional and systemic modifications and reform wherever necessary.

4. Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework of the Study
6. Methodology

6.1 Sample and data collection

Teacher candidates from a small urban college in the Northeast region of the United States participated in this study. The group comprised of 13 full-time seniors (2 males, 11 females) enrolled in clinical practice, who are all over the age of 18 (mean age ~27). Nine candidates identified as African Caribbean, four African American, and one European American.

6.2 Instrumentation

The surveys collected demographic information (gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, household income, country of birth, and employment status) and contain 56 questions across three major categories: support (25 questions); challenges (14 questions); and readiness to teach (17 questions). Participants indicated their level of agreement with a given statement by way of a 7-point Likert scale. At the end of each of the above mentioned categories, a space was provided for participants to add additional comments.

7. Finding & Discussion

Participants reported that among their cooperating teachers, general college faculty and education department faculty, members of the education faculty were most supportive in answering questions, being accessible, providing resources, providing guidance to enhancing student learning and professional growth (see table 1 for raw values). Typical comments stated, “the faculties in the education department try to facilitate the students at all times. Although at times they have busy schedules, they never turn away any student.”

Table 1: Participants’ mean level of support from education department faculty, non-education department faculty, and cooperating teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Education Faculty</th>
<th>Non-Education Faculty</th>
<th>Cooperating Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to answer questions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide resources</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance student learning</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional growth</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All responses are reported as means from a 7-point likert scale with 1 indicating ‘no support’ and 7 indicating ‘exceptional support’.

Of twelve items that may pose a challenge to degree attainment, participants indicated that funding and class load were the greatest challenge to attaining their degree. Funding had a mean score of 4.77 on a 7-point likert scale, while class load received a mean score of 4.08. In term of actual teaching certification candidates noted that passing rates (5.08), paying fees (5.69), and state changes were serious challenges. It is important to note that this particular cohort is the first group required to take three new required state exams for teacher licensure. Many have already taken previous required exams, but are mandated to retake the new version of two tests and one brand new portfolio based exam. Typical candidate commented, “I am really concerned about the recent changes to state requirements due to the fact that my graduation time is drawing near…I am also...”
concern that I don’t know what some of the exams consist of.” Another notes, “It is absurd that the state requires teacher candidates to meet new requirements without first giving education departments a year to review said requirements.”

Given the diverse population of urban schools we asked candidates if they felt prepared to provide culturally responsive pedagogy, use technology and use neuroscience to plan their lessons. Our findings indicate that they were somewhat prepared to engage in culturally responsive teaching, and use technology in the classroom (mean of 5.85 on both items), but felt less prepared to use neuroscience (4.85).

Teacher effectiveness is crucial to the students’ achievement; in particular, readiness to teach groups who have been traditionally underserved is critical to any school’s overall success. Our preparation program places specific focus on working with students of color, students with exceptionalities, and those who are often marginalized and/or excluded from general school curricular programming. Teacher candidates reported that they felt adequately prepared to teach African Americans (mean 6.00), New York City Public School (mean 5.92), Latino American students (mean 5.58), Asian students (5.08) students from low socioeconomic households (mean 5.77), English Language Learners (mean 5.15), ADHD (mean 5.00). Candidates’ responds demonstrate readiness to teach those who have been underserved and undereducated.

8. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

It is clear that we need to ensure that teacher candidates receive support from the entire college and not only faculty within the education department. Education is the business of the entire college and we will need to ensure that our candidates are better supported overall. Funding and financial aid continues to challenge our college students as they are often from low-income household. There is a clear need to provide adequate financial support to a group who feels prepared to meet the challenges of working in urban schools. The United States has called for a more diverse teaching population who is ready to effectively address the needs of its diverse student population. The question remains are we willing to support a teacher candidate population who better reflects the student body it serves? Given our results we plan to conduct actual field test with this sample to measure teacher effectiveness when employed in an actual urban school.

References


