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ABSTRACT

Memphis State University has designed a model for improving the student teaching experience that utilizes selected public schools as clinical training sites. These sites differ in terms of community setting, socioeconomic characteristics of students, and grade levels taught. The sites provide an opportunity for student teachers to work in diverse settings. Six elementary schools chosen as clinical training sites represent urban and suburban systems. Two of the schools are racially balanced, located in middle-income areas, but also serving students from very low-income families. A third school is over 95 percent minority and located in a low middle-income residential area. The fourth is an inner city school, 100 percent minority, serving low-income students from public housing projects. One suburban school is located in an affluent community, and the second serves a community ranging from low-middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. Many student teachers complete experiences in two sites. This paper discusses three areas of the initiative: the factors contributing to establishing these clinical training sites, observed trends and preliminary findings, and perspectives on the model. (JD)

ESTABLISHING CLINICAL TRAINING SITES:

RATIONALE, BENEFITS AND PERSPECTIVE

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Establishing Clinical Training Sites:

Rationale, Benefits and Perspective

Memphis State University, to improve its elementary and early childhood programs, undertook an ambitious effort to upgrade the quality of the student teaching experience. The primary goal of this endeavor was "to enhance the school based training element of the teacher preparation program in a way that best utilizes the resources, talents, and expertise of the various stakeholders (Burch, Bellott and James, 1989)." The new model designed as the delivery system utilizes specially selected public schools as clinical training sites.

Clinical training sites (CTS) are defined as dual mission public schools. One mission is to educate the children who attend the school. The second mission is to serve as a teacher education center through which the faculty and administration work with the University to develop, enhance and refine those clinical skills that beginning teachers need for entry into the world of practice.

The decision to s k a new model rests on three internally held beliefs (James and Burch, 1988). One, the preparation needs of beginning teachers require the combined and sustained efforts of theorists, practitioners and researchers. Two, clinical training affords the best opportunity for prospective teachers to learn how to handle the complexity of the work place. Three, each

stakeholder sharing in the preparation of new teachers has a legitimate interest, performs a unique role and ought to receive a benefit.

Clinical training sites are expected to provide six outcomes. These are: (1) better prepared entry level teachers; (2) improved process for selecting classroom teachers and university supervisors who work with student teachers; (3) more effective role modeling on integrating theory and practice; (4) more efficient utilization of human and financial resources; (5) additional opportunities for collaboration; and (6) new professional development outlets for teachers and professors.

This initiative was grounded on several assumptions and reform recommendations. First, student teaching continues its historic value as a critical part of the preparation program (Conant, 1963; Campbell and Williamson, 1983). But, for student teaching to be maximally successful priority must be given to developing schools as field sites (Fisher, 1988). Second, classroom teachers are known to be important influences in the lives of prospective teachers (Karmos and Jacko, 1977; Hoffman, Funk, Long and Keithley, 1982). however, members of school faculties should perform different roles with student teachers based upon experience, preparation and expertise (Holmes Group, 1986). Third, university supervisors and lead (cooperating) teachers make different contributions to student teachers (Zimpher, deVoss, and Nott,

1980). Finally, public school and university collaborators must recognize that multiple realities exist (Maloy, 1985).

This paper discusses three areas of the initiative: (1) factors contributing to establishing clinical training sites, (2) trends and preliminary findings and (3) perspective.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

A positive working relationship has existed between the university and the local schools. This relationship has been primarily cooperative, typically excluded formal interaction with the recognized teachers' associations, and contributed to a status quo approach to student teaching.

Latent preferences synergistically combined with opportune events, however, led to major restructuring of the student teaching experience. Several events coalesced in 1988-89 to energize the effort. First, an invitation was extended by the Ford Foundation to apply for a clinical training site planning grant. Second, there was evidence that state efforts to effect reform in teacher preparation would continue. Finally, local institutions (university, public schools and teachers' associations) were willing to attend to anticipated problems of supply and demand. The Ford Foundation grant provided opportunity, direction, resources, a forum, and visibility. The Foundation's invitation focused exclusively on collaboratively developed clinical sites. Financial support allowed us to purchase several services. The money was used to buy the following: time and personnel for

planning, release time for university faculty, educational resource materials, travel for collegial exchange with similar planners, consulting time from teachers and principals, and support personnel.

The Ford Foundation required the involvement of three partners: public school systems, colleges or universities with teacher education programs and organizations formally recognized to represent teachers in the collaborating school system. Since these groups usually have different agendas, the grant provided a valuable forum. These groups were successful in discussing and reaching consensus for solution to a common concern: improved preparation of new teachers.

Partner cooperation was partially attributable to the prestige of the grant. The Ford Foundation extended invitations to over 20 groups, but funded only 11 projects. Thus, the honor of being selected carried with it a strong incentive to succeed. Additionally, local publicity was extensive. These conditions coupled with a strong desire to improve one part of professional preparation were instrumental in keeping the group task oriented.

Renewed action at the state level was a another factor. The reform movement in Tennessee originally focused on other parts of the educational process. However, teacher preparation became the focal point in the late 1980's. Particular interest was teacher induction which defined student teaching as a transitional phase linking preparation to independent practice.

CTS: Rationale and benefits

The State Board of Education Ad Hoc Committee on Teacher Induction put forth a position statement that included two strong recommendations. One was that teachers and administrators must be visibly involved in planning and delivering student teaching programs. The other was a recommendation to restructure student teaching to include multiple placements and not less than 15 weeks of full day experiences in schools. These recommendations were subsequently approved by the State Board of Education, with implementation to occur not later than 1994.

Anticipated local problems regarding supply and demand were a third catalyst. Public perception of need for teachers in both local systems tends to impact enrollment in teacher preparation programs. Most teacher education students are domiciled in the metropolitan area or intend to establish the Memphis area as their home base. Low demand during most of the 1980's was accompanied by reduced enrollments in local institutions. Two colleges even dropped elementary preparation programs. Near the end of the decade, however, it became evident that we were in a negative spiral with decreasing supply and increasing demand.

The supply curve was complicated by another factor. Teacher education students were increasingly becoming female and white. The entry level jobs in the larger local system were typically located in inner city schools or in other areas not considered attractive to the largest categorical group of new teachers. Many new inductees chose to serve as substitute teachers in selected

areas rather than take positions in schools that they deemed unattractive.

This condition was magnified by a long standing debate between the University and one of the partner systems. The school system wanted student teaching placements made in schools where newcomers would typically be given first jobs. The University argued that such placements under existing conditions would prove more negative than positive. University personnel insisted that these kinds of placements were possible and desirable provided steps were taken to increase the probability of positive role models for student teachers while simultaneously responding to the deep rooted fears and apprehensions students associated with these assignments.

The planning year led to agreements on beliefs that guided our efforts. One belief was that quality of student teaching experience impacts decisions about entering the profession. A companion belief held that an exemplary student teaching program in a metropolitan area would provide high quality experiences in diverse school environments. These experiences would hopefully impact positively on pedagogical practices and cross cultural understandings.

All partners agreed that carefully crafted experiences delivered through clinical training sites represented the most desirable option that could be immediately implemented. Such sites would help produce future teachers who entered the profession with sufficient confidence to accept positions in a variety of settings,

including those considered to be the "less desirable" schools, based upon student characteristics and community setting.

CLINICAL TRAINING SITES

Six elementary schools were chosen to serve as clinical training sites. These schools represent two systems; one urban, the other suburban. Four urban system schools, grades K-6, were chosen. Two schools are racially balanced. One school is 60 percent minority, the other 60 percent majority. Both schools are located in middle income areas, but also serve students from very low income families. A third school is over 95 percent minority and located in a low-middle income residential area of homeowners. The fourth school is an inner city school, 100 percent minority, that serves poverty students from public housing projects. These schools range in size from 400 to 1000 students.

Two suburban schools were also selected. One school, serving grades K-8, is located in an affluent community and houses approximately 1100 students. The second school serves an unincorporated section of the metropolitan area. Its community ranges from low-middle to upper-middle socio-economic status. It serves grades K-5, with a student body of over 1700. Both suburban schools are predominantly majority, with a 10 percent minority enrollment.

School faculty and administration representatives worked with Memphis State University personnel during the summer to plan the implementation details. These planning sessions provided

opportunities for participants to invest in the project and to clarify expectations and goals.

TRENDS AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

While data are limited, there are observable trends and identifiable benefits that speak to the success of the model. An analysis of these trends and benefits leads us to conclude that the CTS model has great potential for improving the student teaching experience and data provide evidence to suggest the anticipated outcomes are realistic expectations.

Undergirding the CTS concept is the need for a model with the built-in elasticity and flexibility that will meet the changing needs of a student teaching program. Our needs typically fit into three categories: site accessibility, professional expertise, and congruity of purpose.

Site Accessibility

Site accessibility means that schools are readily available for student teaching placements. A second dimension is the degree of freedom that exists for student teachers to avail themselves of the expertise housed at the site.

The implementation of the CTS model and site accessibility has resulted in several improvements in student teacher placement practices. The process is streamlined and provides for direct access to site administrators. Information now tends to be communicated more accurately and quickly. University supervisors are part of the placement process. Because supervisors are

familiar with site teachers, a more personalized decision about individual placements is possible. Placements are processed earlier providing schools and teachers longer lead time to prepare for the arrival of student teachers.

Many student teachers complete experiences in two sites. These sites are expected to differ in terms of community setting, socio-economic characteristics of students, and grade levels taught. The accessibility that CTS schools provide has facilitated and guaranteed that diverse placements can be made. Designation as a CTS school fosters positive attitudes among student teachers about working in diverse settings, and with students they encounter in a these settings. For example, student teacher comments reflect how their personal development was enhanced because of the opportunity to work in diverse settings. Also, several second semester student teachers specifically requested placements in the inner city site.

A small percentage of placements need to be changed each semester. In CTS schools, these changes can now be handled within hours as opposed to days.

Accessibility also means that experimentation is encouraged. For example, politicians, practitioners, teacher educators and teacher education students have advocated that student teachers would benefit from experiencing the commencement of the public school academic year. All partners wanted to test the viability of this recommendation. While other factors had negated previous

attempts to experiment with this idea, the availability of CTS schools provided us the opportunity to investigate the logistical issues and attractiveness of this feature. We extended an invitation to fall semester student teachers and approximately one-third of them accepted, even though this meant shortening summer vacation. Furthermore, we now have a small data base on how teachers perceive this practice.

One site decided to experiment with rotational observation of student teachers by lead teachers. This activity provided lead teachers with a more realistic base from which to judge the performance of student teachers. Teachers, especially those with limited experience as lead teachers, found this technique a valuable learning opportunity.

Professional Expertise

Professional expertise refers to the general and unique talents possessed by site based educators. CTS schools were chosen by application. One criterion was faculty consensus supporting their school as a clinical training site. Another criterion required evidence proving that significant numbers of teachers were qualified and willing to serve as lead teachers. Faculties were informed that a philosophical change had occurred. Student teachers would be assigned to the site with a lead teacher who was a type of mentor; however, student teachers were expected to have access to all expertise that existed in that faculty. Student teaching, as a process, became a site obligation. Lead teachers

and supervisors were expected to utilize other site educators to personalize the experience for student teachers. One example is a student teacher weak both in pedagogical skills and subject area competence. Because of his personality, the cooperating teacher was reluctant to separate professional competence from personal like for the student. A lead teacher who was aware of the situation stepped forward to assist with the assessment and has agreed to allow the student teacher to work with her for a period of four weeks.

Several important benefits are emerging because of this total use of professional expertise. Past experience taught us that we occasionally need to match a student teacher with a lead (cooperating) teacher and this must be accomplished under conditions that protect the legal and academic rights of the student teacher. Frequently this need becomes evident only after a student teacher has completed part of an assignment. In CTS schools, these situations are handled more adeptly and efficiently because teachers know that such adjustments are made to facilitate learning that fosters competence. Administrators, lead teachers, student teachers and university personnel are internalizing that adjustments in assignments for developmental reasons are practices that enhance the image and work of our profession and are not automatic indicators of individual failure.

Preparation of future lead teachers is an important professional responsibility. CTS faculties typically have teachers

with varying degrees of experience. The concept of total faculty commitment provides a built-in mechanism for recruiting and training future lead teachers. Teachers can participate in limited ways to learn about the process before assuming the entire responsibility of a lead teacher.

Teachers who are not lead teachers, referred to as support teachers, are investing in the concept that all teachers share in making student teaching a valuable experience. Support teachers understand that they are available for consultation, demonstration teaching or as another set of eyes to observe a student teacher upon request by the lead teacher.

Congruity of Purpose

Congruity of purpose speaks to the degree to which the university and public schools agree on the goals, expectations, and specifics of student teaching. The CTS model fosters communication, discussion, and shared decision making. A definite benefit of this information exchange is a perceptual change whereby student teaching is increasingly being viewed as a major component of a total preparation program rather than as a self-standing entity. Lead teachers and supervisors realize the importance of knowing the content of prior course work. This trend will hopefully impact on theory courses and open channels of communication between theorists, clinical faculty and practitioners. University supervisors are more concerned about

understanding the school's philosophy and curriculum and helping student teachers translate prior learning into lessons consistent with system goals.

Supervisors and lead teachers have the ultimate responsibility for maintaining standards. These individuals are reinforcing each other and communicating across sites. Expectations for individual student teachers that appear to be unreasonable are more readily resolved. Student teachers, as a group, receive more accurate information. Interpretations of policy and practice are more consistently applied. There is a growing commitment that we are preparing individuals for the profession as opposed to a specific school or system. Furthermore, there is a strong belief that evaluation of competence to determine fitness for entry into the profession is a joint responsibility.

Along with benefits directly related to the student teaching program, other positive trends are emerging. Supervisors assigned to CTS sites are seen as a link to the university. Teachers are beginning to view them as information sources for course offerings and in-service programs.

There have been other linkages. One supervisor made special arrangements for teachers to visit exemplary programs in other schools. Within schools, teachers, with our approval, are using the additional free time that accompanies working with a student teacher to visit other classes.

CTS: Rationale and benefits

The community impact of a school selected as a CTS site enhances the image of the school and brings additional prestige to the administrator and school (James and Waggoner, 1989). For example, one site sponsored an afternoon program to announce their participation as a clinical training site. In attendance were parents and university personnel, but more importantly, the school's corporate sponsor, a county commissioner and the school superintendent attended.

PERSPECTIVE

Clinical training sites represent improvement over our traditional arrangements for conducting the student teaching program. The move to the CTS model expanded the opportunities for interinstitutional collaboration and elevated this collaboration to new levels of trust.

This structural change carries seeds of problems that have potential for inhibiting its ultimate success. Historically student teaching placements have been used to meet political needs for both the preparing institution and the cooperating school and district. The CTS model drastically curtails this practice. Schools and teachers who no longer receive student teachers have expressed concern and disappointment.

Several issues concerning personnel remain unsettled. One issue involves teachers in CTS sites who absolutely do not want to participate. There is a corollary issue of transferring teachers to CTS schools who want to be involved. A second issue is the role

of the university when building principals are replaced. Other issues involve the level of commitment of the university. Historically, student teaching supervision has lowest priority in staffing. One cornerstone of the CTS model is the involvement of the supervisor in the site. This requires a high priority staffing commitment. Another issue is the nature and financing of training for lead teachers. While there is consensus agreement that training is necessary, there is lack of enthusiasm for funding this training.

Clinical training sites represent a major step forward for our student teaching program. The potential inherent within the model far outreaches our former approach. Nurturing the model to maturity will require continuous environmental scanning and perceptive attention to the multiple realities that exist in public school and university collaboration.

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