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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research developed from a more comprehensive study of five teacher training programs at a large urban Southern university. During the initial study characteristics were observed in special education and Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) cohorts which differed from those of students in the three traditional programs. The present study compared the perceptions of students in two preparation programs with similar configurations but differing learner characteristics to determine which factors had the greatest impact on teacher preparation outcomes. Included in the study were 17 undergraduate special education majors, whose curriculum featured a tight cohort structure during the junior year "block" experience, and 9 secondary MAT students in a 14-month accelerated program which included a 10-month internship conducted concurrently with coursework. Study findings indicated that common elements in the configuration of both programs included student cohorts, prescribed class sequences, specialized courses, and a dedicated core of faculty, resulting in a strong group identity which remained for several years beyond graduation and helped build confidence as students began their professional careers. Both groups also reported the positive impact of specialized courses in assessment and planning prior to their field experiences. Differences in student perceptions appeared to be the result of entry level skills and student maturity levels rather than program components. Data indicated that both groups demonstrated significant pre-post gains in the areas of planning, evaluation, instructional strategies, and professional development. MAT interns but not special education students showed significant gains in classroom management, while the converse was true for use of instructional materials. Cooperating teachers appeared to contribute significantly to the success of both groups, providing a positive, supportive environment which encouraged interns/student teachers to try new ideas and take risks. The results indicated that, although learner characteristics differed, the configuration of the program provided academic and emotional support for students which was manifested in a sense of empowerment. Tables of study data are included. (ND)

The Influence of Program Structure and Learner Characteristics on Teacher Training Outcomes

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Recent educational reform has stimulated the development of alternative teacher training programs. While this impetus has produced a wider range of program configurations, studies have not been initiated to examine the results of these programs. Etheridge, Hall & Roberts (1993) indicated a lack of research which compared different teacher education program configurations in terms of differential teaching effectiveness outcomes. Results of a 1988 study (Etheridge, Butler, Etheridge & James) did suggest that Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and traditional programs had different effects on students, but no conclusions were made regarding which program was preferable.

In a pilot study of teacher education programs at a Southern university statistically significant differences were found between the self perceptions of preservice teachers in preparation programs with varying configurations. The purpose of the present study was to compare perceptions of students in two preparation programs with similar configurations but differing learner characteristics to determine which factors had the greatest impact on teacher preparation outcomes.

The programs included in this study were undergraduate special education and graduate secondary education. The special education curriculum featured a tight cohort structure during the junior year"block" experience. Coursework and practica in various handicapping conditions preceded this "block", which was a set of four coordinated courses in teaching methods, classroom management, assessment and a 30 hour practicum. Students had previously participated in approximately 180 hours of clinical experiences during the program which were sequentially planned and closely supervised by the faculty. In addition to the teamwork and cooperation fostered during the "block" experience, special education students also had early exposure to peers who preceded them into student teaching through interaction in a very active student organization.

The 14 month accelerated program for secondary MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) students included a 10 month internship which operated concurrently with their graduate coursework. The internship was scheduled for the first four periods of the day during fall semester and all day during spring semester. Prior to beginning the internship, students took 11 hours of intensive coursework in preparation for on-site teaching. The internship began on the first day of inservice and continued through the last day of school.

Data Collection

The subjects in this study were 9 secondary MAT students and 17 undergraduate special education majors. The study involved two kinds of data to sample student development: 1) quantitative data collected from the Comparative Study of Teacher Education Programs (CSTEP) questionnaire, and 2) qualitative anecdotal data collected from required narrative journals kept by subjects during their student teaching/internship experiences. The CSTEP questionnaire consisted of 85 items clustered into nine subscales: planning, management, parent/community, evaluation, instructional strategies, and use of materials. It was administered to all subjects prior to and immediately following student teaching or the first five months of the internship.

All subjects were required to keep a journal with specific directions regarding content. Journal entries for the special education students covered their 15 week student teaching experience. Students in the accelerated program provided journal entries during the first 5 months of their internship. Qualitative data obtained from journal entries were used to compare the two groups during a one semester student teaching/internship period. Journals were coded by categories, then analyzed within categories for patterns. Categories includes 1) interactions with school participants, 2) interactions with cooperating teachers, 3) school physical environment, 4) management practices, 5) instructional practices, 6) university supervision and 7) non-school factors.

Results

CSTEP questionnaire data were analyzed for changes across time from pre to post student teaching/internship. Multiple t-tests indicated significant pre-post increases in perceived competence across time on many of the questionnaire scales. Such differences were expected because of the experiential nature of the student teaching or internship experience. Results were similar between the two groups with two exception. Both groups demonstrated significant pre-post gains in the areas of planning, evaluation, instructional strategies; and professional development. The only differences across time between the two groups were in the areas of classroom management and use of materials. Significant gains were noted for MAT interns but not for special education students in the area of classroom management. Conversely, special education students demonstrated significant gains in use of instructional materials. This pattern was not noted for MAT interns. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

Consistency was noted between questionnaire responses and journal entries. While both instruments involved self-reported data, the reliability of the informants was strengthened by this consistency. Perceptions reported on questionnaires were substantiated by journal entries noting implementation of skills during student teaching or internships. Reported similarities and differences between the two groups were based on questionnaire results and coded patterns of journal responses.

Similarities Between Groups

Cooperating teachers contributed significantly to the success of both student teachers and interns. They were described as supportive, friendly, and helpful. Mutual respect and professionalism were shown to the interns/student teachers. This created a positive environment where interns/student teachers felt free to try new ideas and take risks. Evaluation was viewed as a learning experience since feedback was constructive and included "wonderful praise and heartfelt criticism." Cooperating teachers were praised for their dedication to teaching, especially in schools where this was the exception rather than the rule. Student teachers identified the support and encouragement of the cooperating teachers as the most important factor in the student teaching experience. Although interns valued the contributions of their cooperating teachers, they felt other factors also contributed to the success of the internship experience.

Subjects in both programs demonstrated strengths in the areas of planning and instruction. In the area of instructional planning, student teachers' journals contained recurring references to "tools", "skills", and "knowledge" they obtained from their preparation program. Anxiety initially expressed regarding the ability to use these skills in actual teaching situations was alleviated once students began teaching and discovered that they could implement the skills they had been taught. Improvement during student teaching came from support and modeling of planning behavior by cooperating teachers as well as trial and error in the success of lessons. Interns perceived a direct relationship between planning, student interaction and effective teaching. Successful lessons involved interactive strategies such as cooperative learning, group work, discussions and games. Poor planning, unclear directions, and boring lessons had a negative effect on student participation and learning. Overestimating the ability of students in the class resulted in frustration for students and teachers. Lecture was the least effective teaching procedure for interns/student teachers; a procedure they admittedly chose when they were tired and unprepared. While initially this

appeared to be the most expedient method, they found it to be ineffective (and uninteresting) for both student and teacher.

Self assurance developed for both the interns and the student teachers as they progressed through the semester. Although apprehensive in the beginning, they learned to overcome their doubts and appreciate in their own abilities. Interns' growth in confidence was accompanied by increasing affirmation that they had selected the right profession. Comments such as "I love it!', I'm "ready to teach", "I enjoy it even more than I thought" and "It's incredibly rewarding to finally find an occupation I enjoy this much" emphasized their enjoyment. Student teachers repeatedly expressed anxiety regarding abilities to plan, organize and use skills in actual teaching situations. Confidence increased in both teaching and planning ability once students began teaching and discovered they could implement the skills they had been taught.

Differences Between Groups

Interns were less tolerant of students who exhibited particular behavioral or academic problems such as resource students and classes of low achievers. They were frustrated by students' lack of motivation rather than low achievement. As a result of their chosen major and subsequent training, special education student teachers did not share these negative views of students who had difficulty maintaining age appropriate academic or behavioral standards.

Impressions of university mentors varied significantly between the two groups. Student teachers reported little contact with university mentors. This did not appear to negatively affect performance since their cooperating teachers were extremely supportive and helpful. Interns described relationships with university mentors and cooperating teachers as similar. They viewed the expertise, suggestions, and support of their university mentors to be beneficial. The discrepancy between opinions of student teachers and interns may be attributed to the structure of the two programs rather than the abilities of the university mentors.

Interns demonstrated significant improvement across time in the area of classroom management; student teachers did not. From the beginning of the internship, these students expressed some confidence in their management skills. When behavior problems occurred, they were dealt with in a timely, consistent manner. Interns approached behavior management in a proactive manner through structure, time management, consistency and pacing. Behavior was more likely to be inappropriate when lessons were poorly planned, boring, or not relevant to the

students. Rather than blame the students, interns accepted responsibility for management problems, analyzed the situation, and devised intervention strategies for improvement.

Special education student teachers demonstrated significant changes across time in the area of material usage. The nature of special education services with an emphasis on individualization may account for these changes. The legal implications regarding development and implementation of IEP goals necessitate the use of diverse materials. Since grade level materials are not usually appropriate for students receiving special education services, special education student teachers were taught to use alternative materials during their teacher training program. This practice was subsequently modeled during the student teaching experience. Although interns were instructed in the use of alternative teaching materials, they were less likely to encounter non-traditional materials in high school settings. In some instances, they were actively discouraged against deviation from prescribed materials. The prevailing philosophy was "stay with the text, cover the material."

Journal entries differed between the two groups. While student teachers remained faithful to the instructions regarding journal entries, interns tended to digress if an issue seemed important. Their analytic approach to teaching was evident from the journal data. One topic they discussed far more frequently than student teachers was classroom management. This is interesting since management was the only questionnaire category that differed between the two groups. Interns analyzed their management skills, related these skills to teaching strategies and made appropriate adjustments to insure the academic success of their students. Interest and vigilance in this area may account for their perceived changes.

Conclusions

Common elements in the configuration of the special education and MAT accelerated programs include student cohorts, prescribed class sequences, specialized courses, and a dedicated cadre of core faculty. The confidence expressed by both groups of students prior to student teaching/internship may be attributed to strong support and a sense of community provided by members of their cohort. Peers provide educational and emotional support through study groups, and informal peer counseling. This group identity,which remains for several years after graduation, helps build confidence as students begin their professional careers.

The sense of community extends beyond the student cohort. Both programs are staffed by full time tenured faculty members who have taught in the program for several years. Faculty

members coordinate course content, balance dates for assignments and tests, and confer on a regular basis regarding student progress. Several are recipients of the University's Distinguished Teaching Award.

In addition to group identity, both programs offer a sequence of courses. Rather than selecting courses based on availability, special education and accelerated MAT students are required to follow a prescribed program. Coursework is related to field experiences and professional requirements. Course offerings, specifically designed for the programs, include content crucial to successful teaching.

The impact of specialized courses was reported in both the journals and the questionnaires. Both interns and students teachers began the student teaching/internship experience with confidence in their ability to evaluate students and plan appropriate lessons. Each program includes a course in assessment and planning. Planning and assessment were identified as an essential skill for special education teachers. The importance of these skills was reinforced in clinical and student teaching experiences where the professional and legal implications of developing IEP's were stressed. A great deal of actual and/or perceived pressure was placed on special education students in this area. MAT students learn to develop assessment instruments at various learning levels. The course is taught concurrently with a methods course where assessment measures are incorporated into lesson plans, microteaching, and unit planning. These specialized courses are not offered to students in more traditional programs.

Differences between the groups can be attributed to both student characteristics and program configuration. (See Tables 3 and 4) Special education students were typical undergraduate education majors: female, 21-23 years old. The MAT students were a select group who had met graduate school admission requirements. The majority of this predominantly male group had left one career to enter the teaching profession. Ages ranged from 25-50. Another important difference between the programs is the 10 month internship experience. While special students complete 2 student teaching placements in 15 weeks, MAT student spend an entire year in the same school. A combination of these two factors may account for differences between the groups. For example, MAT interns were more positive regarding university mentors. The discrepancy between the two groups may be attributed to the structure of the programs rather than the abilities of the university mentors. Interns are assigned a mentor for an entire year. In some

cases, university mentors also serve as thesis chairs or members of thesis committees. This allows for a bonding relationship between the intern and the university mentor. Student teachers have two university mentors, one for 9 weeks and another for 6 weeks. The limited time period precludes the establishment of a close relationship in all but the most exceptional cases. Higher initial confidence levels in special education students may be the result of a small, highly structured preparation program, and frequent direct contact with a relatively small group of core full-time faculty. It is also possible that the expectations of the two groups in regard to mentoring may be different. Younger students may expect more extensive emotional support; older students usually want suggestions for improvement.

Confidence in the area of classroom management may be attributed to the maturity and experience of the MAT students. Although both programs include a course in classroom management, the special education course is offered in the junior year. Interns take a similar course during the fall semester of their internship. Perhaps the opportunity to implement procedures as they are being taught provides interns a forum for trial and error with immediate feedback from their university professor. While several journal entries were devoted to this topic. few problems were noted. Interns attributed this to appropriate planning, interactive lessons, and topics relevant to the students' lives. When problems did occur, the interns accepted responsibility for the situation and analyzed their own behavior. They tended to be reflective rather than reactive.

The advantages of a cohort program structure appeared to transcend the general differences among the two groups of students. Results indicated similarities in coping skills and confidence . The sense of confidence gained through cohort training transferred to professional behavior during student teaching. Self evaluation and reflection were strengths of both groups. Differences in student perceptions appeared to be the result of entry level skills and student maturity levels rather than program components. High initial confidence levels in special education and MAT students may be the result of smaller, more tightly structured programs with specialized courses in assessment, and more frequent direct contact with a relatively small group of core full-time faculty.

This research developed from a more comprehensive study of 5 teacher training programs at a large urban Southern university. During the initial study characteristics were observed in special education and MAT cohorts which differed from those of students in the three traditional programs. Consequently the present study investigation was initiated to compare the perceptions of

students in cohort programs with similar configurations but differing learner characteristics. Learner characteristics such as age, experience, and a selective admission procedure may have been advantageous to the MAT group in some instances. Overall the cohort configuration appeared to be a powerful force in the success of these two dissimilar groups. The results indicated although learner characteristics differed, the configuration of the programs provided academic and emotional support for students which was manifested in a sense of empowerment.

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Table 1

Mean Self-ratings of Preparation in Teacher Education Program Component Areas by Undergratuate Special Education Students

	Pre-st. Tch	Pst-st. Tch	
Scale	*Mean*	*Mean*	t
Plan	3.29	3.70	3.94[a]
Manage	3.39	3.50	1.34
Community	3.16	3.26	0.96
Evaluate	3.11	3.57	3.20[a]
Strategy	3.23	3.47	2.43[a]
Materials	3.49	3.69	2.38[a]
Improve	3.48	3.72	1.23
Culture	3.26	3.42	1.39
Profession	3.32	3.68	3.37[a]

Note. Special Education pre-student teaching: n=17. Special Education post-student teaching: n=20. [a]$p < .05$.

Table 2

Mean Self-ratings of Preparation in Teacher Education Program Component Areas by Graduate Secondary Education Students

	Pre-st. Tch	Pst-st. Tch	
Scale	*Mean*	*Mean*	t
Plan	2.26	3.38	2.74[a]
Manage	2.21	3.24	5.04 a
Community	2.46	2.63	0.57
Evaluate	2.77	3.57	2.95[a]
Strategy	2.66	3.38	2.54[a]
Materials	3.07	3.42	1.79
Improve	2.81	3.45	2.24
Culture	n/a	n/a	n/a
Profession	2.54	4.80	7.07[a]

Note. $n=7$; [a]$p < .05$.

Table 3

Characteristics of Undergraduate Special Education (SPED)and Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Secondary Education Programs

	SPED	MAT
Similarities		
	Cohort; Junior & Senior Years	Cohort 14 months
	Assessment Course	Assessment Course
	Consistent Faculty Group	Consistent Faculty Group
	PresecribedCourse Sequence	Prescribed Course Sequence
	Coordinated Class Assignments (Tests, papers, projects)	Coordinated Class Assignments (Tests, papers, projects)
Differences		
	Student Teaching: 15 weeks Two placements: 9 weeks/6weeks	Internship: 10 months Two placements: 3weeks, 9+ months
	Two University supervisors:	Same University Supervisor
	University Supervisors may be adjunct professors.	University Supervisor often serve on theses committees.
	Classroom management-junior year	Classroom management concurrent with internship

Table 4

Learner Characteristics of Undergraduate Special Education (SPED Students)and Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Secondary Education Students

SPED	MAT
Majority Female	Majority Male
Traditional College Age	Age Ranges: 23-57
Traditional College Students	Career Change Students
Undergraduate GPA: 2.5	Graduate GPA: 3.0
PPST required for TEP admission	Miller Analogies Test (40) or GRE (860) required for TEP