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ABSTRACT

This study explored the dimensions of an initial teacher preparation program that revealed problems and ideals of preservice practices by focusing on the impressions and experiences of student teachers and those who work with them. Data were collected at four sites in the southern United States, a university and three elementary schools. Data collection included group and individual interviews with student teachers, individual interviews with faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers, analysis of letters written by past student teachers, and observations of student teachers in their assigned classrooms. During this investigation, four themes emerged regarding elementary teacher preparation. First, the program's mission, curriculum, and pedagogy were not clearly articulated and only partially fulfilled the goal of preparing quality teachers. Second, the consistency with which the themes of caring, initiative, and commitment to the field appeared in the data suggests that students, teachers, and faculty view these aspects as critical prerequisites to the profession. Third, attempting to understand and work within the complex context of the classroom while struggling with the nature of teaching results in frustration, stress, and attributions of luck rather than effort. Finally, with the immersion into the student teaching experience, preservice teachers embark upon a process of role identification and socialization that continues throughout their careers. (JLS)

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ED 405 335

Developing Teachers: A Novice-Expert Study of Initial Teacher Preparation

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Developing Teachers:

A Novice-Expert Study of Initial Teacher Preparation

Abstract

This study explored the dimensions of an initial teacher preparation program which revealed problems and ideals of preservice practices by focusing on the impressions and experiences of student teachers and those who work with them. This paper is intended to illustrate to those involved in developing and instructing initial teacher preparation programs what knowledge, attitudes, and skills are requisite to a successful student teaching experience and the best ways to develop them. During this investigation, four themes emerged: The first theme deals primarily with the mission and goals of the program and whether they were met. The second theme identifies what the prerequisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes the students need prior to student teaching. The third theme studies the attributes of a successful student teaching experience, as well as the affective impact of the experience. The final theme involves reflecting on the transition from the role and responsibilities of a student to that of teacher.

Developing Teachers:

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As I walked down the hallway of the elementary school toward the classroom I was to observe, I could hear the children. There were loud shouts, and the sound of a chair falling, a short scream. Unusual, I thought. I paused before opening the door when I heard an adult voice. "Please be quiet! I don't want to hear any more noise!!" The voice sounded distressed, louder than normal, impatient. "Sit in your seats! I want everybody's head down on their desk for one minute!" I took a deep breath and opened the door. (Clinical supervisor reflecting on an observation of a student teacher)

Those are not the same children that I taught yesterday. (Student teacher being observed)

Introduction

Many student teachers are overwhelmed when first thrust into the classroom.

Student teaching is not what they thought it would be, many feel unprepared. Student teachers struggle with the myriad of minute details, the constant problems and endless responsibilities, the unexpected and sometimes anticipated realities of the contemporary classroom. How we prepare students for this experience is critical to the successful development of professional educators.

This study seeks to understand the process of initial teacher preparation and its affects on the developing teachers in the program. The study reveals problems and ideals of preservice practices by focusing on the impressions and experiences of student teachers and those who work with them. This paper is intended to illustrate to those involved in developing and instructing initial teacher preparation programs not only what knowledge, attitudes and skills are prerequisite to a successful student teaching experience, but what the needs and responsibilities of the student teachers are in this process as well.

Methodology

The design of this qualitative study involved the analysis of data collected during 1993-1995. Data was collected at four sites in the southern United States, a university and 3 elementary schools. Data collection methods included group and individual interviews with student teachers, individual interviews with faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers, analyzing letters written by past student teachers at the end of their student teaching semester, and observations of student teachers in their assigned classrooms.

The interviews conducted used an interview guide which offered a loose structure for the duration of the interview. The same guide was used for individual, as well as group, interviews. Interviews and observations were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim. Most of the interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours; although a few lasted up to two and a half hours. Observations of student teachers in their classrooms lasted approximately one hour, and were conducted at the invitation of student teachers who wanted to share their teaching environment in order to enhance the depth of my understanding of their experiences. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality so they would feel free to discuss thoughts and feelings regarding the program with no fear of repercussions. The methods were chosen in order to garner "expert" first hand experiences which provided unique explanations and perspectives that ranged from novice student teacher to expert faculty supervisor.

Analysis

To best interpret the meaning of this data, systematic analysis was conducted separately from data collection. The data was triangulated to ensure proper analysis and strengthen the design of the study (Patton, 1995). Information was gathered from a variety of sources and professionals involved in teacher preparation. Participants

from the study reviewed preliminary interpretations and were encouraged to give feedback regarding the investigator's analysis. Furthermore, the analysis was also shared with other faculty, researchers, and scholars in order to garner their personal insights and professional interpretations of the data. As the data were analyzed, four major themes emerged reflecting the goals, opportunities and experiences in teacher education programs. In each thematic area, student teachers' perspectives are compared with those who facilitate their preparation, namely clinical supervisors and cooperating teachers. Furthermore, those perspectives are compared across themes.

The first theme deals primarily with the mission and goals of the program and whether they were met. The second theme identifies what the prerequisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes the students need prior to student teaching. The third theme studies the attributes of a successful student teaching experience, as well as the affective impact of the experience. The final theme involves reflecting on the transition from the role and responsibilities of a student to that of teacher.

The Program:

“There is an important distinction between teacher education versus teacher training.” (Faculty Supervisor)

The elementary education program at The University was designed to provide students with the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to enter the teaching profession, as well as to produce quality teachers for the region. In order to attain this goal, the program provides students with knowledge and research of the social, emotional, and intellectual development of learners, the nature of the public school and its community role, and the skills used by teachers as facilitators of learning in instructional settings (The School of Education Mission Statement, 1993).

The University is a liberal arts research institution committed to scholarship, discovery, and transmission of knowledge. During the first two years at The University students attend General College where they are expected to meet certain coursework requirements. Admittance to the Education Program requires a 2.5 cumulative grade point average and passing scores on the Communication Skills and General Knowledge portions of the National Teacher's Examination. Elementary education students must also have a second area of academic concentration outside of education. Five courses are required during the junior year and include: social foundations of education, the psychology of learning, human development, basic instructional media skills, and the teaching of reading. During the last semester of the senior year, students are expected to take a "professional block" of courses. While enrolled in this block, students learn methods of teaching science and mathematics, classroom management and organization techniques, theories of motivation, issues of testing and assessment, and complete full time student teaching in a public school. The student teaching experience is under the joint supervision of an experienced classroom teacher and a faculty supervisor.

The data gathered about the elementary program were sorted into two broad categories: reflections of the teacher preparation program as it is now and how it can be improved, and specific areas of concern for the preparation of students for the student teaching experience. Reasons and perspectives were given by students, teachers, and faculty why the Program was meeting or failing to meet its goals for preparing education majors for the responsibilities of the teaching profession. One cooperating teacher who participated in the study also attended and graduated from the program. He reflected:

I felt like the classes in the School of Education were not that challenging. They were very much like high school courses where "here's the work, get it done." Not a discussion of the

work, and what does it mean; but "here's the assignment, we'll have a test on it." I didn't think they were very stimulating, so I took a lot of classes outside the school of education. I want something where it's give and take, where I have a part in what I want to learn. (Cooperating Teacher)

Other comments included:

I think we could've done just as well without having the classes. Of course they gave us terminology and things like that, but I think the reason we're surviving right now is trial and error. What we learn here when we're put on the spot. My concentration was psychology, it helps to understand what's going on in a child's head, but I'm not able to teach them that. (Student Teacher)

I have a problem with college in general. Everything is too divided and so split up. How are we supposed to be able to come into a classroom and successfully integrate a program? I don't feel like it's possible, and I don't feel like we have enough training. I feel totally unprepared to go in and do curriculum work. I feel like I've got a whole other college to go through on my own to prepare myself to teach. (Student Teacher)

The elementary program seems to be struggling with an identity crisis of a professional school in the context of a liberal arts university. The program faces the difficult task of trying to teach students the skills and tools of the profession in today's ever changing classroom domain. However, the program is set up in the traditional format of transmitting a broad theoretical knowledge base of development, learning, and pedagogy which is often difficult for novices to generalize into practice. The faculty and administrators of the elementary program are currently trying to develop a new program that better meets the goals of the school and needs of the students.

Many of the people interviewed elaborated how this might be accomplished:

In the model we have now for the students, we talk a lot, we read a lot, but there's not enough practice; we're not being developmentally appropriate or intellectually challenging. We should try to model good teaching practices ourselves as a program, more than stand up and lecture, we need a hands on approach. (Faculty Supervisor)

There is an important distinction between teacher education versus teacher training. Teacher education needs to prepare students to make decisions from a broad cultural background. Students need a good broad generalist experience in content area. Advance courses won't help teaching elementary kids; not just content, but content organized in a way the child can learn it: pedagogy, methodology. (Faculty Supervisor)

I think the ultimate goal of a school of education would be to have a program that is an internship. You go get your degree in an area that makes sense to you. You have a degree so you are coming into student teaching as someone who has other options. It needs to be that we have a profession where people look and say this person could do a hundred different things but he chose to be a teacher. (Cooperating Teacher)

While gathering this data, specific areas of concern regarding the elementary education program kept surfacing again and again. I thought it prudent to include these areas. Many different reasons were given as to why these areas were weak and whether they were even 'teachable' or not. These areas included preparation for classroom management and adapting instruction for exceptional children. It is important to note that longitudinal studies of initially certified teachers consistently rank the tasks of classroom management and the instruction of exceptional children first in the areas beginning teachers feel least prepared for in the classroom.

Whenever we did talk about it, all they would say is this is going to be your biggest problem, and they told us what not to do. You never use any type of punishment with the children, you never raise your voice to the children, you never do this, you never do that. But they never tell you what you should do, except that you should prevent problems, but they don't tell you how. So I would say, that's probably one of my biggest complaints. I feel like I've learned a lot of interesting things in my education classes, but I guess I feel like I forgot most of it because I wasn't in a classroom and couldn't apply it immediately (Student Teacher)

I'm concerned with classroom control. I think it's a very tough thing. I learned it all on my own and I think every one of these student teachers is learning it all on their own. And maybe that's the way to learn it. Maybe we can't prepare students for it like the way you prepare them to teach math, or a reading lesson, or prepare a unit. (Cooperating Teacher)

I would like there to be kind of a thread that is woven throughout the program so that we're not just saying okay, we know all this about so called "normal" kids here's what to do with all the other kids, because frankly all those other kids are becoming the majority of children in those classes, so I don't think we can just lump everything into just one course and say this is what you can do for the other kids. Because these students the minute they walk into a classroom, are dealing with attention deficit children, down syndrome children, a lot of BEH children that are in the regular classroom, so right away the demands are on the student teacher to start dealing with the special needs kids. And we're all special needs kids in a way, these AG kids, we're all gifted in some way too. (Faculty Supervisor)

Student Teaching Prerequisite:

**"I expect total devotion, and dedication, and a terrific attitude--
a real willingness" (Cooperating Teacher)**

The second theme identifies what the participants regarded as primary requisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes the students need prior to student teaching.

Surprisingly, knowledge and skills were secondary to attitudes, values and commitment which were recited the most by faculty supervisors, cooperating teachers, and students alike. The prerequisites listed also included specific experiences with children, time spent in school environments, knowledge of content, and communication and organizational abilities. However, many of those involved in preparing and working with the students recognized more abstract and subjective esoterics such as initiative, devotion and a positive attitude.

What do you think students need to know before they start to student teach? Well, how long do we have? Here's the exit criteria, it would be nice if they knew all. . .this could be the entry criteria! (Faculty Supervisor)

So, I expect them to be knowledgeable and I expect them to be very dedicated, very enthusiastic and willing to work. And another thing, I expect them to be curious, real curious. The student teacher I had last year wanted to know everything. I almost expected him one day to ask what did you eat for breakfast. You know, it was How do you do that? How would you do this? Why did you do that? How would you go about this? Why did you handle that in that way? He was so thirsty, just thirsty. That's what I'd expect. A real thirst for knowledge, because that's what I'm being paid to do, I want somebody to pick my brain and not to stop until they walk out the door the last day and even then. . . (Cooperating Teacher)

A critical factor that a preservice teacher needs is caring: the ability to relate to human beings, for lack of a better word. This includes communication skills, interpersonal skills, commitment to the field. The program has difficulty in this area, not facilitating the ability to work with others, work with children, rapport. Self-starters, taking the initiative in their own education. More of a quality level than specific skills. (Faculty Supervisor)

Many of the students also recognized the need for this state of mind when immersed in the student teaching experience.

I think that students should come into the student teaching experience knowing that they're not going to be able to do everything perfectly. They need to see failure as a method of learning, it's a hard semester for anybody who's a perfectionist. (Student Teacher)

It is an entirely different world in the classroom. You are responsible for each child's learning. Don't let them down. Always be prepared. Just a little warning about the children. Sometimes they are more lovable than at other times. Always be patient. Remember they are somebody's pride and joy. Show them all lots of love everyday. (Student Teacher Letter)

Emotional Fallout and Luck:

"I don't hate it." (Student Teacher)

The list of prerequisites reads like the entry criteria into the Saint Gabrielle's Pearl Gates. Because of the multitude of written and unwritten criteria, even the most devote students anticipate the coming of the student teaching experience with excitement, apprehension and fear. Doubts plague the minds of even the most prepared students, and frustration rules from a perceived lack of control over their future. This is a difficult and trying time for students. Even student teachers who successfully complete their fieldwork, and some mentors involved in the program, contribute factors such as luck as more likely to contribute to success than effort. Couple this with the act of having to perform and work in another person's territory (i.e. the classroom) where difficult tasks such as setting new boundaries and developing lines of communication with a mentor who seemably weilds immediate and powerful levels of control may seem insurmountable, impossible, and, at the very least, highly stressful. Because of this, many students feel frustrated, vulnerable, and overwhelmed.

Most of the students will probably tell you that they are overwhelmed when they get out there and meet the minute by minute decision making experience in the classroom. None have had the overall responsibility of the total classroom . Academically prepared, Yes; working with children, No. (Faculty Supervisor)

I think it's luck depending on the teacher, your cooperating teacher. I think that makes the whole experience whether you succeed or not, or whether you feel like you succeed or not. Because I know some people who got a cooperating teacher they didn't get along with, and their experience is negative. (Student Teacher)

A lot of it was the situation, I didn't want to come in and take over. He had his own way of getting things done. I mean who are we to come in here and screw up his system, change things around? We're only going to be here, what, 6 weeks? (Student Teacher)

I think a lot of it depends on where you're at and the teacher you're with, and I've been pretty lucky. I mean sometimes I come home wanting to cry, and sometimes I come home just as happy as I can be, I really think that students need to find out what it's like early, not that they should student teach when they're a freshman, but it would be pretty sad to get to this point, your final semester find out you don't like it. I mean I have bad days, everybody has bad days, but my supervisor told me don't focus on the things that go wrong, focus on the things that go right. Lots of times you go home and there's one kid that you didn't get along with, and you forget about the 24 other kids that had a wonderful day. (Student Teacher)

For a few of the student teachers effort and luck is not enough and they are forced to drop out or fail. One student teacher, who decided it would be best to take an "incomplete" in student teaching this semester because of personal reasons, shared her initial reactions to the classroom with me:

Class is fairyland compared to student teaching. You talk about this child this and this child that, usually about teaching one child. But during student teaching you usually have 30 some children in a class. It's mind boggling when you get out there. There are records to keep, and interruptions, money to collect, bus schedules, and extra duties. In education classes you know you can go and observe and it can be a fun thing because it really doesn't matter. But when you've got the class and you're trying to teach them, you expect them all sitting there eager to learn and they're not. It's tough. It's a whole lot different than what the textbook says. Student teaching is just an unbelievable situation--just unreal. (Student Teacher)

Faculty is quick to attribute many of the problems with a loss of confidence or communication; whereas, students cite a lack of support in their process of becoming a teacher. However, these factors can also work in reverse. As support and confidence for the students grow, so does the probability of a successful experience and a smooth transition to the role of teacher.

It kind of bugs you when you're sitting in class, getting ready to meet your goal and everybody's telling you "why are you doing it, you're not going to make any money, you're going to hate it, the kids are going to drive you crazy." I mean that's what they tell you. (Student Teacher)

My roommate is a secondary ed. major who will be student teaching next semester. She went back home and her teachers told her "Why are you doing this? You don't want to come back here. Why are you going into education? Really, you should change to something else." Really, that was a teacher talking to her, one of her favorite teachers. (Student Teacher)

Before I entered my student teaching semester, everyone kept telling me what an awful experience it was going to be. I was paranoid by the end of the summer and was preparing for the worst. I can honestly say that I have learned more about children and their development than in all of my previous education classes and life experiences! (Student Teacher Letter)

Roles, Responsibilities, and Lessons Learned:

"I'm prepared to be a learner, a learning teacher."

(Female student Teacher)

The dichotomy of living a professional existence in the body and mindset of a university student is one of the more difficult aspects of student teaching. How a

student teacher works through this intense experience of professional initiation will determine the extent to which they feel able to take on the role and responsibilities of a teacher, and to begin to identify and bond with the profession. The professionals that have facilitated the growth from student to teacher also reflect on how their roles have contributed to the development of a professional identity.

So really, at the beginning, what I am looking for is do they ease into the teaching role, taking on responsibility gradually, and feeling comfortable with that role. Because it is difficult crossing that bridge between being a student and being a teacher, and that's what we're really about this whole semester. (Faculty Supervisor)

I tell students that I don't want them to be seen as just an observer in the classroom, that while it's ok to do observing and make notes, that they should also let the children see that they are a responsive person that they're another teacher in the room. That they help kids see them as a teacher. They're not a baby-sitter, they are a student teacher who is part student and part teacher. (Faculty Supervisor)

While the emotional impact of student teaching is an apparent and accepted fact, the physical and social adjustment to the professional responsibilities can be just as difficult.

I don't think that any of us realized the impact this would have on our social life. it's a big adjustment getting up at 6 o'clock every morning and going to bed at 9:30, 10 p.m. This is the time where all your roommates are at the bars until 2 every morning. You have to give that up. (Student Teacher)

Be a Professional. This is hard since as a student teacher, you are playing a dual role. You are not a student teacher in your classroom, you are a full-time, full responsibility teacher. The only things missing are your legal status and a salary! (Student Teacher Letter)

I warn you not to panic. Mental effort is only one type of effort you will encounter. Physical effort is the other. (Student Teacher)

Balancing being a student with being a professional teacher was the hardest part of my semester. This is a stressful experience and even the best children can be monsters sometimes. (Student Teacher Letter)

Finally, as the professional identity develops, and the rite of passage nears its end, students begin to feel the weight of their newly acquired skills much as a new bird readies for flight.

I think we are waiting eagerly for the day when we have our own classroom. I mean we're glad to be here but it's still not our classroom. It's going to be a lot different when it's actually ours. More meaningful. (Student Teacher)

I guess I feel about as prepared as I can be considering that you're never going to be prepared for every situation that comes up, you have to make split second spot decisions. But I'm not prepared in the sense that I'm not going to have any problems or questions or moments of insecurity about what I'm doing, but I know I'm prepared to be a first year teacher. I'm prepared to be a learner, a learning teacher. (Student Teacher)

The student teaching experience is an important initiation into the teaching profession. Not all the participants in this study have successfully completed this rite of passage, so, as teacher educators, we need to be reminded just how encompassing and important this experience can be. Periods of transitions often cater to feelings of vulnerability, disorientation, and intense emotionality; however, there are ways to control some of the variables in the context of student teaching and preparation for the experience that may help to reduce some of this stress.

Summary and Conclusion

Shulman (1987), reflecting on the complexities of teacher preparation, states: “. . . our question should not be, “Is there really much one needs to know to teach?” Rather, it should express our wonder at how the extensive knowledge of teaching can be learned at all during the brief period allotted to teacher preparation.” (p.7) This study reveals four basic themes regarding an elementary education teacher preparation program. First of all, the Program's mission, curriculum and pedagogy were not clearly articulated and only partially fulfilled their goal of preparing quality teachers. Second, the consistency with which caring, initiative, and commitment to the field appeared in the data suggest students, teachers, and faculty alike view these aspects as critical prerequisites to the profession. Third, attempting to understand and work within the complex context of the classroom while struggling with the nature of teaching results in frustration, stress and attributions of luck rather than effort. Finally, with the immersion into the student teaching experience, the novice embarks upon

the process of role identification and socialization which continues throughout their career.

There is an emphasis in education to rely on personal knowledge and experience to solve practical problems. Hargreaves (1984) studied this phenomena and found that teachers gave more credence to their own personal experience than to the theories they learned in their formal education. The research depicted here has shown how this can lead to a lack of collaborative effort by the department, students, and faculty alike; a lack of objective criteria within the program itself. How successful a student teacher's experience is depends entirely on the luck of the draw: what faculty supervisor they are assigned to, who their cooperating teacher will be. If they "luck out" and get dealt a good hand, they will succeed, develop, and learn. At this point in the program, there are literally as many elementary education departments as there are elementary education faculty.

Student teachers are novices in need of opportunities to develop and practice the specific skills and tools of their trade. The multitude of teaching responsibilities is an exhaustive list that includes the abilities to: facilitate learning and development of students; develop learning experiences and resources appropriate to the developmental level of learners; assess this level and determine if learning has taken place; organize and manage a classroom in an efficient and appropriate manner allowing for flexibility and growth; and understand and be able to adapt for multicultural diversity and exceptionalities among their students. The faculty and cooperating teachers interviewed for this study reflect Schon's (1987) statements regarding a paradox that exists in teacher education: "The prospective teacher can learn how to teach by encountering the paradox of beginning to teach before they know how, an encounter which assures that the learning process of the beginner will

necessarily involve mistakes.” (p.26). However, by bridging the gap between sound preservice teacher education and the student teaching experience can only better facilitate the socialization of student to teacher.

Goodman (1986) states that “Learning to become a teacher is a complex process of socialization that involves an individual’s thoughts, perceptions, values, and actions.” (p.31). Developing a program which provides all students with the skills, attitudes, and values needed to develop professionally is the utmost goal of The University. Implementing a program that is collaborative, structured, and developmentally appropriate for learners at this stage is a worthy goal for faculty and administrators. We must come to the realization that we teach as we were taught. Modeling plays a fundamental role in teacher education and must be considered when developing and implementing a teacher education program. This is a critical factor in education and the role it plays in our society; because, if the future of our nation rests in our children, then the future of our children rests in those who teach them, those whom we teach.

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December 11, 1996

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Sincerely,

Lois Lipson
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