

Critical Features of Program Improvement: Lessons From Five Minority Serving Universities

Norma A. Lopez-Reyna

Peggy A. Snowden

Nicole M. Stuart

Dana Baumgartner

Michael J. Maiorano

Monarch Center

University of Illinois at Chicago

Nationwide, personnel preparation programs are responding to the changing population demographics and its impact on Pre K-12 classrooms. Needs surveys conducted by the Monarch Center over the past ten years have consistently yielded a need for support in redesigning program course and fieldwork components to better prepare their teachers and other professionals for effectively serving children who are culturally and linguistically diverse and have disabilities. The five university programs featured in this special journal issue each described their work in a context of their past program work, specific needs grounded in the populations of teacher candidates they were preparing, and the children that the graduates would be serving in schools. All of the programs had a shared set of overlapping foci in their plans and actions that included (a) diversity and the need to link coursework to field experiences, (b) the use of stakeholder input and feedback, and (c) the use of multiple formative and summative assessments of teacher candidates and of the programs themselves. We discuss these similarities across the programs, discuss their relevance to the field of teacher education, and provide a summary of lessons learned.

Keywords: Monarch Center, minority serving institutions, program improvement, program redesign

In this article, we present observations and reflections based on our work with more than 250 teams of faculty members who are engaged in the education of professionals to serve children with disabilities, specifically with the teams whose work is featured in this special issue. The success among the teams of faculty that we worked with on their program improvement initiatives has steadily increased as we continually improve our approach and provision of supports (see Bay, Lopez-Reyna, & Guillory, this issue). We note similarities across the programs, discuss their relevance to the field of teacher education, and provide a summary of lessons learned.

The Monarch Center has been engaged with personnel preparation faculty in special education and related services at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) for almost a decade. As described by Bay and colleagues (this issue; see also Bay, Lopez-Reyna, Snowden, & Zazycki, 2011), the Monarch Center Technical Assistance (TA) approach began as an approach based on

professional development (Lick, 2000; Lieberman & Miller, 2001), systems change (Fixen, Blasé, Naoom, & Wallace, 2007; Fullan, 1998; 2001), and standards for effective technical assistance (Trohanis, 2001). As we interacted with and learned from our participants, the Monarch Center TA model has evolved across the years. Generally speaking, we have found that the literature provides only indirect guidance toward the process of program redesign and even less with regard to program improvement (Lopez-Reyna, Bay, Zazycki, & Snowden, 2011).

Teams of special education teachers and related services preparation faculty attend Knowledge Exchange Seminars hosted by the Monarch Center as they launch into a year of concentrated and focused attention to improving the quality and content of their programs on a particular theme or area of need. For example, there have been cohorts that focused on: (a) creating blended programs for early childhood and special education, (b) collaborating with their higher education colleagues to redesign programs that prepare teacher candidates to teach in inclusive settings, (c) infusing culturally responsive practices to assure that candidates can effectively teach children with disabilities from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or (d) rethinking their program to include practical, field based experiences throughout the program. When teams sign up with the Monarch Center yearlong model of technical assistance and support for program improvement, they commit to focus on goals and objectives co-written with colleagues. Goals are constructed during the Knowledge Exchange Seminar with an assigned mentor who has expertise related to their focus. They also become a part of a cohort that report to one another via listserv and periodic phone conferences, exchange resources and materials, and serve one another in the sense of providing a group of comrades who are sharing in a similar initiative to change an aspect of their preparation programs. For the most part, the work of personnel preparation is multi-faceted, including attention to state and local standards, federal mandates, campus level regulations, and the specific needs of future educators, while also continuing the typical responsibilities of a higher education faculty member. Evaluation data have consistently revealed the strength and value of the initial Seminar for creating bonds among teams across institutions, teams who rarely have opportunities for sustained thinking and working with their colleagues (team members), and with teams from other parts of the country. Teams are uniquely aware of the needs and constraints of their work, as well as, dedicated to attaining the highest outcomes for their graduates and ultimately, the students that they will be serving.

The five universities featured in this issue describe working in a context of their past program efforts, specific needs grounded in the populations of teacher candidates they were preparing, and the students graduates would be serving in schools. In addition to these social cultural contextual features, all of the programs had shared overlapping foci in their plans and actions that included: (a) diversity and the need to link coursework to field experiences, (b) the use of stakeholder input and feedback, and (c) the use of multiple formative and summative assessments of teacher candidates and of the programs themselves. The following is a discussion of each of these three areas with examples from the participating institutions. Detailed accounts of the work of these five institutions may be found in this special issue for the University of Texas Austin (Robertson, Garcia, & McFarland), University of South Carolina Upstate (Pae, Wittaker, & Gentry), University of the District of Columbia (King-Berry & Boone), University of Guam (Fee, Fee, Snowden, Stuart, & Baumgartner), and Springfield College (Cyr, McDiarmid, Halpin, Stratton, & Davis-Delano).

Diversity and the Need to Link Coursework to Field Experiences

Nationwide, personnel preparation programs are responding to the changing population demographics and its impact on Pre K-12 classrooms. Needs surveys conducted by the Monarch Center across the years (internet based, event feedback, focused surveys, etc.), have consistently yielded a call for support in redesigning program course and fieldwork components to better prepare teachers and other professionals for effectively serving children who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and have disabilities. Indeed, teacher education graduates continue to express the lack of preparedness to teach diverse students (Warren, 2002; Helfrick & Bean, 2011; Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2004). Colleges and schools of education are responding to mandates by national, professional, and state requirements to infuse diversity throughout their pre-service programs for teachers and professionals. This has been met with less than thorough integration (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). Some institutions add one stand-alone course, others focus on a few courses in which to attend to culturally diverse needs, while others commit to integrating diversity throughout their programs (Scott & Mumford, 2007).

Faculty at the institutions featured in this issue represent several approaches to program improvement. The program coordinators at the University of Texas Austin (UT) describe the arduous process of creating a series of intersecting matrices to develop courses and specific assignments within each course that align with both CEC (Council for Exceptional Children) and their state standards. In doing so, the faculty designed a curriculum that blended the specific competencies to be mastered during the five-semester program with the specific competencies required to teach CLD students with disabilities. They created a two-course sequence to bookend their program. During the first semester, an intensive course on intercultural communication and collaboration was paired with a practicum to lay the foundation. The special education teacher candidates explored their own racial identities through reflective inquiry-based coursework, which required teaming with their bilingual education peers from the department of curriculum and instruction. Candidates were tasked with designing a curriculum to meet the needs of bilingual students with disabilities, while at the same time developing collaborative skills. UT Austin faculty considered their program to be a work-in-progress and stated that there is still much to be done, including integrating culturally responsive concepts and skills throughout the curriculum and increasing collaboration between special education and general education faculty.

In a similar fashion, the University of South Carolina Upstate (USCU) revised their program to be in full alignment with CEC Core and Learning Disabilities Standards along with securing NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) accreditation. With the goal of program integration, faculty restructured the curriculum to include assignments that targeted culturally responsive issues and topics in all coursework and clinical settings. The content courses were revised to ensure teacher candidates acquired the appropriate knowledge regarding multiculturalism and diversity, while the field-based assignments were revised to allow candidates to apply principles of behavioral and cognitive theories, practice collaboration, and explore different perspectives, all through a culturally responsive lens.

Concerned with the ever-increasing diversity within the Guam schools, the University of Guam (U Guam) aligned its program content to provide teacher candidates' with experiences and

course content that would prepare them for serving multiple diverse populations and used the rubric required by NCATE Standard 4. Their faculty thought it imperative to include a cadre of guest speakers that represented the many different cultures that made up the community to allow the teacher candidates opportunities to listen and ask questions relevant to their future classroom positions.

Springfield College, faced with a population of school children who are not culturally represented in the teacher education student enrollments, focused the urgency of their needs by redesigning their instructional methods courses. Redesigned content emphasized teaching practices that were culturally responsive and could be adapted to multiple content areas, such as math, reading, and social studies. This provided for better preparation of their candidates in the dual licensure program to work in collaborative inclusive settings. Beginning with the math methods course, the faculty team developed objectives through which their candidates had to demonstrate proficiency across the content areas. These objectives included planning for culturally relevant lessons designed to meet the needs of students who are English language learners and had a variety of life experiences. Additional professional development gave the Springfield College faculty the opportunity to scrutinize examples of ways to incorporate the new objectives into their courses, therefore learning new teaching concepts and practices that could positively impact the outcomes for CLD students.

Along with incorporating content related to diversity in coursework, the programs exemplified in this special issue also focused on the provision of clinical experiences in diverse settings where teacher candidates would gain practical and applied knowledge with diverse students. Indeed, well-planned coursework and content connected with structured field experiences serves to instill teacher candidates' awareness of issues and their attitudes toward CLD students (Bodur, 2012; Kyles & Olafson, 2008). Darling-Hammond (2009) referred to the lack of connection between campus courses and field experiences as "the Achilles heel of teacher education" (p. 91) (Zeichner, 2012). This statement underscores the belief that many pre-service education programs do not adequately bridge the divide between coursework and school classroom experiences for their teacher candidates. Darling-Hammond (2006) also described the current method for educating teachers as analogous to a factory model, calling for a shift in program design that calls for coursework to be intertwined with clinical practice. Whereas traditional schools of education front-load courses early in the program and end with a few weeks of student teaching, more progressive programs imbed at least two semesters of clinical experiences, including student teaching. Such extended coursework/clinical experiences provide a context for professors and practitioner teachers to align concepts with strategies and create favorable conditions for teacher candidates to learn and practice in a seamless manner. In such programs, teacher candidates are afforded opportunities to understand theories of teaching and learning, experience how theory directly affects practice, and learn how students are affected (Henry, 1983; Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2001).

Similar to the course practicum formats utilized by UT Austin, the U Guam augmented all of its courses to include more attention to multicultural education, to be taken in tandem with a practicum experience component. Hence, all pre-service educators were provided with meaningful assignments and purposeful field-based activities that afforded them the opportunity to connect culturally relevant coursework to practice. Conversely, the USCU candidates

concurrently enroll in methods of teaching and a clinical course where they were required to plan and implement a unit of instruction, design activities, and reflect upon their abilities to appropriately provide instruction in responsive ways. Though they have made great strides in restructuring their program and to secure clinical sites with a diverse student population, the Springfield College program redesign continues to be an urgent work-in-progress as they struggle in their efforts to obtain model field-based sites of collaborative teaching in multicultural settings.

As outlined by these examples, coordinated coursework and field experiences is key to infusing diversity, as well as, state and professional standards into teacher preparation programs that strive to prepare teachers who are knowledgeable and skilled for the demands of today's classrooms. These institutions are making systematic and reflective efforts within and across programs to improve outcomes for students with and without disabilities.

Responsiveness to Stakeholder Input and Feedback

A characteristic shared by the innovative, culturally responsive teacher preparation programs described in this special issue is the use of stakeholder input and feedback in the program improvement process. Though varying in approach and degree of intensity, these programs used stakeholders to inform the inception of the change process, throughout the change initiatives, and to inform program evaluation. For example, UT Austin held teacher candidate focus groups and administered surveys to cooperating teachers and principals. Similarly, feedback on course revisions and trial implementation of syllabi from internal (program personnel) and external (community partners and Advisory Board members) stakeholders was provided to faculty at the University of the District of Columbia (U DC). Springfield College collected data from both a Collaboration and Needs Self-Assessment Survey distributed to their local partner schools. In a contrasting example in response to the Executive Director of the U Guam School of Education, the Program Chair of the Special Education program sought to partner with the Guam Department of Education to create a solution for the critical shortage of special educators on the island.

These examples are consistent with the patterns noted by Lopez-Reyna, Bay, Zazycki, and Snowden (2011) in their study of successful program improvement efforts. Based on their work with 67 personnel preparation teams, participants cited the ability to gain approval and hence, buy-in, both internally (e.g., from faculty colleagues, department heads, and administrators) and externally (e.g., from school district personnel and community stakeholders) were among the most critical supports to their efforts. In fact, previous research supports the notion of transparency in program evaluation by including stakeholders across the entire process, from design (e.g., needs assessment surveys, focus groups, interviews, discussion forums) through implementation (e.g., follow-up surveys, induction year observations, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires) (Brett, Hill-Mead, & Wu, 2000; Jarrell, 2000; Ryan & Johnson, 2000; Torres & Preskill, 2001). By participating in the entire evaluation cycle, stakeholders develop a sense of ownership, which increases the likelihood of their commitment to program improvement goals (Lusky & Hayes, 2001).

Many researchers argue that school-university partnerships, particularly the relationships between teacher candidates, supervising teachers, and clinical faculty, are weak and disjointed (Allen, 2011; Johnston, 2010; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Patrick, Peach, & Pocknee, 2008; Yayli, 2008; Trent & Lim, 2010; Zeichner, 2006). This underscores the critical need for creating collaborative, equal, and equitable relationships among all stakeholders in the teacher education program evaluation process.

Teacher education programs involve a large number of external stakeholders, those directly involved with program graduates (e.g., cooperating teachers, mentor teachers, pupils, and principals) and those who form opinions after experiencing the work of program graduates (e.g., local school districts and parents) (Wineburg, 2006, p. 58). In a survey of members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Wineburg (2006) observed that feedback from multiple stakeholders requires programs to collect a variety of data, in various formats in accordance to the purposes for their use. To accomplish this, teacher education programs need to: (a) identify the data needed by various constituencies to provide evidence of quality and areas for improvement, (b) work together with state agencies and professional practice boards, the federal government and national accrediting agencies, university faculty and administrators, K-12 partners, and policy makers, and (c) reach consensus about what data are useful, at what levels, and for what purposes (Wineburg, 2006, p. 63).

As Stronge (2006) points out, “In order to accomplish personal and professional goals, the individual needs the institution. In order to accomplish organizational goals, the institution needs the individual” (p. 4). A high quality teacher assessment and evaluation system builds upon a dynamic balance between school and teacher improvement. To achieve this balance, Stronge suggests that program evaluation should include mutually beneficial goals, emphasis on systematic communication, collaborative climate for evaluation, technically sound evaluation systems, and the use of multiple data sources (pp. 6-7). Interconnected school-university networks benefit all stakeholders (Smedley, 2001). The CLD special education program improvement models described in this special issue add value to the practice of including stakeholder’s voices in their program evaluation, both with regard to graduates and the program itself.

Use of Multiple Forms of Data for Formative and Summative Assessment

A third theme noted across the five programs featured in this special issue was the precise use of data to inform program faculty with respect to the program and teacher candidates on a formative basis, as well as, to provide summative information that could be used in other contexts, such as in response to accrediting agencies. A variety of methods are used to assess the development of pre-service teacher candidates during their educational program and practicum. These measures have evolved beyond the use of quizzes, tests, and sample lesson plans, which Takona (2003) attributed to the “old paradigm” of teacher progress assessment. Under the “new paradigm” of pre-service candidate assessment, qualities of effective teaching and measurement of candidates’ achievement of these qualities is the focus. Authentic, performance-based assessment, or other systematic evaluation methods have been adopted by teacher education programs to inform decisions about the competence of teacher candidates and to appraise whether they can

appropriately apply the knowledge, skills, and strategies that they have learned (Cummings, Maddux, & Richmond, 2008; Dean & Lauer, 2003; Takona, 2003). Among measures used to these ends are portfolio assessment, reflection logs, and disposition instruments.

Student portfolio assessment is utilized for varying purposes within education. It may be employed to document student achievement or growth over time, to review a teacher's performance, or to facilitate continuous program improvement within a teacher education program (Cummings et al., 2008; Dean & Lauer, 2003; Takona, 2003). Portfolios can be paper-based (Berrill & Addison, 2010; Imhof & Picard, 2009) or web-based (Bannink, 2009) or employ a combination of platforms (Cáceres, Chamoso, & Azcárate, 2010; Cummings et al., 2008). The literature suggests ways to evaluate student portfolios and improve faculty engagement (see Cummings et al., 2008), as well as, the explicit instruction required to facilitate teacher candidates and faculty use of portfolio methods of assessment (Imhof & Picard, 2009). The effects of close instruction and analysis of portfolios on the improved quality of program course and practicum content is also noted (Berrill & Addison, 2010).

Several programs that were discussed in this special issue used portfolios in their special education personnel preparation programs. For example, the USCU program required candidates to prepare a portfolio to demonstrate their teaching competencies, including responsiveness to student diversity. Candidates were asked to include in their portfolios: (a) statements regarding their teaching decisions during lesson planning, (b) artifacts from their teaching, and (c) reflections on their learning. USCU faculty used student portfolios for formative and summative purposes with regard to evaluating students' developing cultural competence.

Additionally, faculty at UT Austin required assignment submissions through *Blackboard* and *Google Docs*, which facilitated instructors' feedback on students' collaborative work. The ease of supporting the revision and iterations of students' work, assessing students in real-time, and facilitating students' professional development is one advantage attributed to e-Portfolio platforms. U Guam also adopted e-Portfolio assessment to meet NCATE requirements, as well as, to conduct their teacher candidate and program evaluation. Program faculty teams reviewed students' portfolios three times during the program and comprehensive exams. Fee and her colleagues (this issue) commented on the importance of this metric to communicate the revised program's effectiveness to internal stakeholders, which distinguishes this program from the others described in this journal.

Reflection logs may be included in a candidate's portfolio and provide another distinct measure of teacher candidate growth, as reflection on experiences to facilitate personal or professional development is considered an essential teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Takona, 2003). Critical reflection has been defined as a form of self-study (Parkison, 2009) that includes an individual's culture, histories, worldview, and experiences that form personal knowledge and professional practice (Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011). Moreover, reflection activities are thought to support the connection between research and practice in teacher preparation programs (Oner & Adadan, 2011).

Reflection activities were included as stand-alone assessments, as well as, part of larger portfolio assessment practices employed by the personnel preparation programs discussed in this special

issue. As previously noted, USCU required their teacher candidates to prepare reflections on their learning with regard to inclusion. Autobiographical reflections and reflection logs were incorporated across different courses within UT Austin's program to support the documentation of candidate growth. These assignments reflect current research findings, which suggest that teacher candidates require numerous opportunities to reflect on their teaching experiences to integrate reflection into their professional practice.

In addition to portfolio assessments and reflection activities, pre-service teacher dispositions have also been a candidate evaluation focus in personnel preparation programs for decades. Professional dispositions are frequently defined using the language of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2007): "Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development." Despite their importance, measuring individual dispositions and making decisions based on what is found remains a challenge for teacher educators (Englehart et al., 2012).

Competency-based dispositional assessment was a priority for U DC faculty, particularly as the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) related it to one of the funding requirements. After substantial work reviewing and revising their Associate of Arts Paraprofessional Program, faculty defined their next program improvement steps. These steps included assessment of their candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The U DC faculty expressed their interest in using disposition assessment to evaluate their candidates' growth and to monitor the impact of their program.

UT faculty also received OSEP funding and made special educator competencies, as defined by CEC and the Texas State Board for Educator Certification standards, a priority in their program redesign efforts. Courses and assignments were aligned with the standards, and teacher candidates' competency dispositions were assessed using these assignments. Cooperating teachers and hiring principals completed an additional, comprehensive measure of the candidates' competency dispositions. This contributed to the dual purposes of candidate and program assessment. Summarized data from this instrument was used to identify weaknesses and to make improvements to UT Austin's teacher preparation program.

Disposition assessment was also integrated into U Guam's special education preparation program. Disposition rubrics that evaluated student competencies were completed by program faculty and at least one current school supervisor, entered into students' portfolios, and used to evaluate candidates' application of knowledge. These stakeholder ratings allowed U Guam faculty to follow their candidate's cultural competence as they progressed through the program.

Consistent with Jung and Rhodes's (2008) call for competency-based dispositional assessment in teacher education programs, a recent focus for teacher candidate assessment high-leverage practices parallels an emphasis on assessing teacher candidates based on their teaching competencies. *High-leverage practices*, for the purposes of teacher education programs, are considered to be core teaching practices that cross disciplines and grade levels (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009); lead to greater gains in student learning when used proficiently (Ball, Sleep, Boerst, & Mass, 2009); can be articulated and taught by teacher

educators and practiced and mastered by teacher candidates, regardless of teaching style (Ball et al., 2009); are research-based (Grossman et al., 2009); and, can be assessed more readily than dispositions (Sawchuk, 2011). Borko and Whitcomb (2008) highlight “learning about student understanding” and “orchestrating classroom discussions” as two prominent examples of core teaching practices found in the literature.

Several authors noted the complex challenges of restructuring their teacher education programs and developing assessments around core teaching practices, as opposed to the typical ways of teaching and assessing future teachers, which emphasize content knowledge (e.g., teacher certification, coursework completion, and teacher licensure tests) (Borko & Whitcomb, 2008). Grossman and colleagues (2009) describe the program work in terms of reorganizing the curriculum around a set of core practices and then fostering within teacher candidates the professional knowledge, skills, and an emerging identity around those practices. Specific to assessment, they suggest that pre-service teachers will require numerous opportunities for practice in K-12 classrooms with targeted feedback from faculty who may also guest teach in those classrooms. Ball and colleagues’ (2009) effort to revise their K-8 mathematics teacher education program with respect to high-leverage practices involved: (a) identifying and choosing the core teaching practices; (b) creating a library of detailed instructional materials; (c) developing structures for collective work, including planning meetings, studying one another’s teaching, detailing lesson plans for each university course to be used by new instructors; and, (d) collective grading. Regarding assessment, the faculty evaluated candidates’ videos of field-based teaching, and a practice-based final exam was adopted for the math methods course. The evaluation tools for these assessments were created through faculty collaboration with particular attention to high-leverage practices as well as the time constraints that their colleagues may experience.

Although the programs discussed in this special issue made strides in meeting this assessment priority as they scrutinized and revised their programs, and used assessment to understand their students’ growth as well as areas for improvement in their personnel preparation programs, additional restructuring is required. However, the strides they have made thus far will serve them well in moving forward toward a comprehensive assessment of high-leverage practices.

Discussion

When we invited the contributors in this special issue to write about their experiences with program improvement, we specifically asked them to address barriers to and supports for their work. For the most part, they all chose to focus on their process of moving forward, noting barriers only as a feature of the contexts in which they were working. That is, they all made deliberate collaborative decisions to work with those factors over which they had control as a means of overcoming, or at least navigating through, obstacles and barriers. For example, some faculty members received specific supports such as course release to review research related to the targeted program improvement initiatives, sabbatical time to concentrate on proposed program improvement, and funding to hire retired faculty. Their goals and objectives were fully embraced by the faculty in adjoining departments, as well as, their higher administration. Another team, by contrast, referred to their struggle with “institutional sluggishness” and described how they got the work done in spite of this challenge. All teams accomplished

significant program changes that improved the quality of the content and process of personnel preparation.

Key to positive change in program improvement efforts was the investment of time to secure the agreement (or “buy-in”) from their colleagues. As has been previously noted (see Lopez-Reyna et al., 2011), the extent to which participants were able to accomplish program reform efforts of the nature that are likely to be sustainable was founded on the extent to which they had the collaboration or cooperation of not only those within their immediate home departments but also the extent to which the interests of other departments, the candidates themselves, and field-based teachers were represented.

Our participants’ program improvement progress reports, particularly final reports often referred to a journey, defined as “a process, passage, taking a rather long time.” We believe this descriptor captures the nature of the work we have had the privilege of being a part of for almost a decade. The teacher educators who contributed to this special issue are deeply committed to the hard work of improving the quality of the teachers they prepare to serve children with disabilities. They often state that their program improvement efforts are a work-in-progress and we have observed that there is typically a steady forward movement that does not diminish under external pressures. Given the multiple demands on the time of teacher educators, those outside of field are often awed that reform is accomplished in an environment of ever changing demands. Inevitably, the question emerges of “finding time” to do the work. We have learned that most often the Monarch Center participants don’t “find time,” they strategically *prioritize* their time and work long hours beyond the workday and workweek.

As noted by Bay and her colleagues (2011), it appears that change and reform are best accomplished when the participants are responsible for determining both *what* they want to focus on and the *pace* at which they wish to progress. Allowing such breathing space for the participants, their unique (and potentially changing) program contexts, and their self determined goals, is grounds for lasting change that is goes beyond a response to the daily external pressures and serves to strengthen the very foundation and build the capacity of the program.

AUTHOR NOTES

Norma A. Lopez-Reyna, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Director of the Monarch Center. Her research interests are in the areas of assessment and literacy instruction of English learners with disabilities, family engagement, teacher preparation, and use of qualitative inquiry to inform instructional practices. **Peggy A. Snowden, M.Ed.**, is a doctoral candidate in the Special Education Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests are in the areas of culturally responsive teaching and teacher education. **Nicole M. Stuart, M.Ed.**, is the Program Associate for Communications and Partnerships, Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests are in the areas of science literacy, bilingual special education, and family involvement. **Dana Baumgartner, PhD.**, is Research Associate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests are in the areas of teacher education, mild/moderate/severe disabilities, and teacher collaboration. **Michael J.**

Maiorano, M.Ed., is a PhD candidate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research interest is early literacy instruction and children with intellectual disabilities.

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