"Mister What Time is it?" Preparing Teachers for Border Schools: The Case of the Arizona Borderlands

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Abstract

"Mister, what time is it?" is an account of the evolution of a traditional teacher education program into an alternative certification program in the Arizona borderlands, outlining the theoretical frameworks that shaped the program redesign, program design elements, and challenges encountered along the way. We found many of the perennial problems of teacher education: the disconnect between schools and the university; the challenges of finding critically conscious teachers in rural schools to serve as mentors; and the difficulty of embedding teacher dispositions in observation tools (Zeichner, 2017). The redesign of the program led to two awards from the NSF Noyce program. Early-entry or teacher residency programs have been on the rise in the past two decades addressing the urgent needs of urban schools. Our work adds the rural context to this ongoing, teacher preparation reform movement (Zeichner, 2017).

Keywords: Context-specific teacher education, education issues on the border, Mexico/Arizona educational issues

In the borderlands of Southern Arizona, twenty-six percent of children under eighteen live in poverty. Schools along the border have a migrant population whose bilingual and bicultural students oftentimes have confusing immigration status. Student scores in border schools in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona are consistently lower than scores in the rest of the state (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004). There are an estimated 12 million people living along the U.S./Mexico border, yet little is known about the ways to best recruit and retain teachers for these communities (Cline & Necochea, 2006). The challenges facing teachers in schools where

many students cross the border each day to attend school are enormous and complex, both culturally and politically (De la Piedra & Araujo, 2012). Many students spend part of their schooling in Mexico and part in Arizona. Yet, Arizona and Mexico do not have reciprocal agreements to share student records, which means as students move back and forth across the border, they do so without formal school records. Many students spend long weekends and holidays with their families in Mexico and return to U.S. schools where their lives in Mexico are all but excluded.

Schools on the border share challenges typical of most Title 1 schools: poverty; poor student performance on state tests; teacher and administrator attrition, and low teacher salaries. To make matters worse, an Arizona ban on bilingual education has made it more difficult to meet the needs of the large percentage of English Language Learners in the region. In some of our partner schools, 97% of students are Latinx. Additionally, Arizona ranks last in the nation in school spending, leading to dilapidated school facilities, boarded up and bent lockers, and broken clocks and bell systems. As one math teacher notes, “The most common question I get in my Algebra 1 class is: ‘Mister, what time is it?’”

In 2008, the Arizona Department of Education, recognizing the looming teacher shortage crisis, encouraged teacher preparation programs to offer alternative certification tracks, placing teachers in the classroom as they completed their certification programs. Program approval for these new tracks was dependent on the development of consortiums of schools and a teacher preparation program that worked to establish new course work that addressed the needs of teachers placed in classrooms as they were in their training period. Thus, the Borderlands Consortium was established in 2008 with 13 partner districts. Thereafter, in 2009, the state approved our alternative certification track and our district partners established a design team

that collaborated with us on a Department of Education, Transition to Teaching (TTT) grant which was awarded in 2010 (#U350A110033). This grant allowed us to spend four years in an iterative design process that is outlined below.

Theoretical frameworks informing program redesign

In redesigning our program, we deliberately selected frameworks that speak directly to the needs of new teachers on the border. These frameworks, woven together, provided the theoretical foundations for the work of program redesign. In keeping with the emerging context-specific teacher education framework, we believed that we should be preparing teachers for work in border schools, rather than preparing teachers for *any school, any place* (Haberman & Post, 1996; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014). Ground-breaking work over the past 20 years has clarified our understandings of the importance of teachers being self-aware, culturally proficient, and flexible (Hollins, 2012; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Zeichner, 2010). Culturally sustaining pedagogy grew out of this work and includes a set of pedagogical strategies that prepare teachers to understand local students, cultures, and geographies (Ladson-Billings,1994 Paris & Alim, 2014; Valenzuela, 2016). Ethnic Studies programs around the country are a prime example of the best of these pedagogical practices.

There are growing calls for teacher education to become more grounded in practice (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et.al., 2009; Zeichner 2017). Urban teacher education programs and teacher residency programs have pioneered attempts to more fully integrate preparation into specific urban school sites (Matsko & Hammerness, 2014). The increasing calls for embedding teacher education in school sites sounds good in theory, yet the problems of the *two worlds* Norman and Feinman-Nemser (2005) identify makes a transition to this model challenging. Disconnect between the culture and norms of the university and the culture of schools remains a

barrier to more fully integrating preparation in schools (Zeichner, 2010). In the rural context, this challenge is amplified by the need to work with multiple districts, each with their own culture that our program had to navigate. This central and perennial disconnect in the field of teacher preparation presented the greatest challenge to building a mentor network that had to operate across institutional boundaries and school cultures.

The theoretical framework provided by the concept of funds of knowledge and the analysis of the Latinx student experience that it is based on helped shape the development of context-specific content for border teachers (Gonzalez et al., 2006; Lopez, 2018; Rippberger & Staudt, 2003;). Our initial study of four districts was driven by the need to provide new teachers with an in-depth understanding of communities they were serving and the funds of knowledge that students bring with them into class. Equity Literacy (EL), as developed by Gorski (2013) became the conceptual framework that drove the program re-design work. In Gorski's view, equity literacy is the ability to recognize inequities, to respond skillfully to inequities, to redress inequities by understanding the institutional roots of inequity, and to actively cultivate equity and the ability to sustain equity efforts in the face of opposition. The EL framework was introduced in the first course students enrolled in and woven into all course work. We are still in the process of designing classroom observation tools that incorporate observations of EL principles.

Teacher education program design elements were built on conceptualizations by Zeichner (2010) and his idea of a *third space*, which calls for the creation of new spaces where teachers, community members, and teachers in training work together for the benefit of particular students in particular schools. To this end, the *Sin Fronteras* programming opened up our work to the community as an attempt to create a third space that is neither the school nor university. The National Latino/a Education Research and Policy Project (NLERAP) shaped our thinking about

the importance of the concept of a *grow your own* teacher preparation program and power of participant action research projects for new teachers. We also adopted continuous interrogation of teacher identity and positionality (Valenzuela, 2016), as advocated by NLERAP

Finally, the importance of mentoring in the development of new teachers was an initial design principle in our program. Recent findings on the correlation between mentoring and teacher retention were particularly compelling as we moved forward with our design. The mentoring framework for the project was developed in collaboration with a psychology professor who drew on mentoring literature that was grounded in aligned theoretical principles.

Program Development

The core components of the TTT project were set out in the initial proposal and were based on theoretical frameworks and research on teacher education as well as the needs identified by our 13 partner districts. These components included:

- A robust mentor network to support the work of new teachers on intern certificates.
- A central focus on cultural issues facing border teachers.
- Tightening the alignment between M.Ed. coursework and fieldwork.

As we began the implementation of the TTT program, we spent a year getting systems, protocols, and structures in place. Additionally, we worked with our partner schools to establish working relations and communication networks.

In the first year, the design team acknowledged the need to provide new teachers with in-depth knowledge of partner communities to uncover the funds of knowledge that exist in school communities they were serving (Gonzalez et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Murrell, 2001; Valenzuela, 2016). Four high schools were selected as sites for in-depth case studies. The schools were selected based on district commitment to participate. Undergraduates from these

communities collected data using multiple methods including focus groups, eco-mapping, school data analysis, student and community stakeholder interviews and surveys, and photo documentation. The team constructed in-depth case studies from the data collected in partner schools that participated, which were shared with district partners and incoming students. The case studies were most important because they resulted in profiles of the schools for incoming TTT Fellows. Most of the TTT Fellows were not from the border area and the profiles helped them learn about the schools they were about to enter as teachers. These in-depth profiles delineated core elements of life in our partner communities:

- The importance of community and family.
- The strong student motivation to learn.
- A belief in the importance of giving back and being a part of the communities.
- The high level of teacher motivation for professional growth.
- The central role schools play in rural communities.

Our analysis of these four sites also uncovered disconnects in the following areas:

- The contrast between students' and teachers' cultural backgrounds.
- The lack of available, up to date, working technology in the schools.
- The physical distance between schools and the university that presented challenges relative to scheduling professional development programming.

Findings from this initial investigation helped shape changes to program design that took advantage of the strengths in these communities. As we made these changes, we worked to minimize the impact of the challenges faced by the school communities.

Program redesign work took place over a five-year period and was driven by a continuous improvement model using participant evaluations of pilot projects. In addition, we

conducted informal and formal evaluations with partner school administrators and community partners. During the first three years, we struggled with the site-based mentor model we had designed. Consequently, we moved to a university-based coaching model that has been much more successful. The details of the challenge of site-based mentors are discussed below.

Our first cohort was very small, leading us to understand the need for a recruiter, as suggested and approved by our Department of Education program officer. Once we had the recruiter in place, our enrollment numbers increased. In addition, the relationship with our partner districts improved because the recruiter began working with the human resources departments in districts and linked district needs to the targets of his recruiting. Importantly, the recruiter we brought in was bilingual and from a border community. These characteristics were crucial in establishing relationships we sought to establish.

We have been tracking new teacher retention data since the award of the TTT grant 2011. Of the 98 STEM teachers that completed the program, 69% are still teaching. Additionally, another 6% have moved to other roles in education, allowing for an overall retention rate of 75% for our graduates (Unpublished annual NSF report). The program retention rate is even more impressive given the fact that Arizona has the highest annual teacher turnover rate in the nation at 19%, compared to 8% nationally (Education Resource Strategies, 2018). In conversations with administrators from partnering districts, we often heard that our TTT trained teachers were not part of the revolving door of teachers that has plagued their rural districts. We continue to track our graduates to keep these numbers updated and will do follow-up studies with them as part of our on-going work. We attribute the program re-design to our strong retention numbers and the award of two NSF Noyce grants. In 2015, an NSF Noyce grant (NSF #1557396) supported the preparation of STEM teachers for border schools, and in 2019 another NSF Noyce grant (NSF

#1950129) was awarded to prepare teacher leaders. In that cohort of 13 STEM teachers, three are teachers trained during our TTT grant.

The development of a teacher education seminar learning community, called *Sin Fronteras,* evolved over time to integrate coursework into a *third space* of monthly gatherings for teachers. Funding from the TTT grant allowed us to develop the annual *Living and Learning on the Border Symposium*, which brings leading research scholars to the border to work with teachers from across the region. It is important to note that whenever we bring teachers together, we provide a free lunch, believing this is one small way to honor the work that teachers do.

One piece of unfinished business has been the re-design of our observation tools to align more fully with our new EL conceptual framework. Since mentors were responsible for bi-monthly observations of TTT Fellows, we worked to refine an observation tool that was appropriate to the border context and aligned with the equity literacy conceptual framework of the program. We had initially thought that we would use a variant of a teacher observation form used in one of our partner schools for the purpose of evaluation; however, we soon found that each district used a different teacher observation form. We also learned that many observation tools, like Danielson (2006), identified teacher behaviors that, "while associated with achievement for the non-Hispanic sample; …the teacher behaviors did not generalize to the Hispanic sample" (López, 2014). Initial efforts to create a classroom observation tool measuring EL, the Equity Literacy Observation Protocol for Secondary School Teachers (ELOPSST), included developing items and testing for inter-rater reliability. However, we recognized the challenges associated with creating the ELOPSST since, as Gorski (2020) makes clear, EL is not a set of classroom activities. Instead, it is a developed ideology that is committed to recognizing, responding to, and creating and sustaining equity. Thus, our overarching question was, how do

we observe and measure our teaching Fellows' EL? Reflecting upon our analyses and discussions from initial field tests using the ELOPSST, it became increasingly clear that, as Gorski (2020) cautioned, EL is not a set of classroom practices and that EL skills and abilities are not clearly visible through classroom observation. Rather, any attempt to assess teachers' EL would need to include discussion and analyses of the ways teachers conceive of their classroom pedagogies and activities.

Lessons Learned

Our work uncovered aspects of learning how to teach on the border that have profound implications for the further development of early-entry, context-based teacher preparation program theory and practice. Our initial study of four districts reported above was key in supporting new teachers' understanding of the context of their work. Our project wove together the move from mentoring to robust coaching, curricular changes to address equity issues and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014), and a context-specific preparation program that links university course work and practice together more tightly. All these moves address perennial challenges in teacher education.

From Mentoring to Coaching

Research over the past 20 years indicates that mentoring has a strong and powerful impact on new teachers (Callahan, 2016; Devos, 2010). However, the nature of that mentoring and how to train and support new mentors has been a challenge to the field of teacher education (Zeichner, 2017). This challenge is primarily the result of the unintentional consequences that result when mentors reinforce the status quo in schools rather than drive innovation (Kralovec & Lunsford, 2015). We found that teachers in our mentor network were great 'cheerleaders' for their schools. However, we also found, as Zeichner (2010) has reported, that teachers were often

unwilling to look critically at student data and were thus disconnected from the reality of student achievement in their own school. We often heard from Fellows in surveys that they wished "[We] all spoke with one voice," highlighting for us the distance between what they were told by mentors and what was communicated in coursework.

Our shift from a site-based mentor to a coaching model was driven by our inability to find mentors in our partner schools who could support the conceptual framework of our program and who could help our students understand their students. In surveys completed by our initial mentors over a two-year period, we were shocked by one particular finding. When asked how their students identify themselves, 2/3 of our mentors could not indicate how their students self-identify. The disconnect between students' and teachers' cultural backgrounds, uncovered in our initial community surveys, was borne by the limited cultural understandings of our mentors. This supported our decision to develop a different model for supporting new teachers. Ultimately, in the last two years of our TTT grant, we hired a full-time coach to work with our TTT Fellows. Our coach, an expert science teacher, has aligned his coaching work in schools with the conceptual framework of our program and serves as a leader in the professional learning community.

M.Ed. Program Curricular Changes

One of the key areas where we knew changes were needed was in the very traditional curriculum in the M.Ed. program. Arizona's teacher crisis, fueled by the lowest teacher salaries in the country meant most districts were desperate for teachers on intern certificates. Yet, we knew that the preparation of these teachers on intern certificates needed to be different from a traditional, student-teaching approach to teacher preparation. In the first year of the program, students were enrolled in the same online courses as students in the traditional M.Ed. track. The

first major change we made was to have students complete the program over 24 months instead of 15 months, with heavy coursework during the summers. We soon realized that the existing M.Ed. courses were generic in nature and designed to prepare teachers for schools that were *nowhere* in particular. We were able to hire a new faculty member who engages critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and critical discourse analysis in his investigations. He brought the framework of Equity Literacy to our early discussions, and this became the new conceptual framework for the program. His participation in developing the M.Ed. program and curriculum in this direction led to the need to integrate the EL framework into all classes.

University policy allows course changes up to 40% of course content without review. Changes beyond the 40% threshold must go through approvals at both the university and state levels which can take years. This was important because we needed to align program coursework more closely to the immediate needs of first year teachers in border schools. For example, we changed a course in multicultural education to an Equity Literacy course and methods and management classes underwent revisions to both content and instructors. To teach these courses, we approached a few mentors who shared our philosophy, were clear about what these courses needed to cover, and who worked side by side with our Fellows. Because none of the mentor teachers held doctorates, we had to work closely with the Dean of Graduate Studies to obtain permission to use them as instructors in graduate-level courses. Finding ways around these kinds of institutional regulations is time consuming, often frustrating, and illustrative of the ways universities can become barriers to changes needed in the teacher preparation process. Several of our courses were taught by adjuncts and faculty in fields other than teacher education, with many not welcoming the modifications we were working toward. Thus, to ensure course revisions rooted in the Latinx student experience (Cabrera et al., 2011; López, 2018) and inclusion of the

EL conceptual framework, we enlisted a professor of Latinx identity and achievement (López, 2018). Ultimately, we were successful in overcoming the challenges that restricted our ability to connect our academic program more directly to our Fellow's work in their classrooms.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

According to Paris and Alim (2014), "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 88). Paris and Alim advance Ladson-Billings' (1994) notion of culturally relevant pedagogy and roots CSP in our understandings of the cultural wealth students bring with them to school (Gonzalez et.al., 2006; López, 2018).

This sort of teaching practice was evident in the now-outlawed Mexican American Studies programs in Tucson, Arizona, where the integration of Mexican and Mexican American history and literature broadened and deepened the existing curriculum in these areas (Arce, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, this curriculum spoke directly to students (Arce, 2020; López, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). However, most new teachers cannot develop their own understandings of the kind of integration needed, given their own narrow educational background in the area of Mexican and Mexican American history and culture. We found that new border teachers need a broadened education in Mexican/Mexican American/Latinx studies. The inclusion of this content should be part of any program preparing teachers for border schools, and given the Latinx population growth in this country, all teachers should know more about the cultural history of these students.

While strong and conceptually aligned programming and classroom support are essential to the growth of new teachers anywhere, without cultural understandings of *place,* new teachers on the border are perplexed (Romo & Chavez, 2006). The rise of urban teacher residency

programs has given the field a model for context-specific teacher education (Matsko & Hammerness, 2014). However, the rural, border context provides unique challenges. In Arizona, the challenges are compounded by the intense politicization of the immigration debate and the militarization of the border. Many of our students are spouses of members of the border patrol and carry the fear and suspicion with which border patrol are trained into their classrooms. Silencing this fear has become another continuing challenge for us.

Context-Specific Teacher Education

Many universities hold classes in public schools to make their program more embedded in clinical sites, but often these classes are isolated from the daily work in schools. The degree of context-specific teacher preparation we were striving for is evident in urban teacher residency programs (Matsko & Hammerness, 2014; Solomon, 2009; Taylor & Klein, 2015; Zeichner, 2010). Developing these kinds of partnerships in urban areas typically occurs between one large school district and the university. In our rural area, we had to develop these relationships with 13 school districts, each with their own unique culture.

Implications and Conclusions

The program reported on here was time-consuming and expensive to build. It challenged institutional boundaries and *Sin Fronteras* created new spaces for teachers to come together. When COVID-19 caused the closure of schools in 2020, the world and teacher education changed. Faculty in colleges of education had difficulty understanding what was happening to teachers in classrooms, unless they had children enrolled in schools. Teachers suddenly had to rely on each other to figure out how to teach in this new world, since most university faculty knew little about the online platforms teachers had to learn (Kralovec et al., 2021a, 2021b). While most educators hope for a return to normal, the COVID-19 pandemic provided teachers

with opportunities to work collaboratively and to be innovative. These conditions alert us to the possibility that, perhaps, teachers might be the best trainers of teachers.

We believe the efforts described here adds to the body of theoretical work in teacher education that calls for a greater emphasis on early-entry, context-specific teacher preparation. While extant work has been focused primarily on urban schools, our endeavor adds a rural, U.S.-Mexico border context to this developing framework (Andrews, 2009; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014; Schultz et.al. 2008).

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