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Responding to Special Education Teacher Shortages in Diverse Urban Settings: An Accelerated Alternative Credential Program

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Program Rationale

The United States has a severe, chronic special education (SPED) teacher shortage (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004) that has resulted in the proliferation of unqualified teachers working with students with disabilities. In 2002–2003, California mirrored national trends with 18% of SPED teachers working without credentials, most of them centralized in high-poverty urban areas (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning [CFTL], 2003). California's SPED teacher shortage resulted from several factors, including a growth in the number of students qualifying for special education, teacher retirements (CFTL, 2003), and the credentialing process coupled with the assignment of novice teachers to challenging urban settings (Andrews, Miller, Evans, & Smith, 2003).

Program Sponsor

Alternative certification routes, implemented to ease shortages, have dramatically changed California's university teacher education population from traditional preservice candidates to inservice candidates. California currently issues two types of alternative credentials to practicing but untrained teachers: emergency permit and intern. Inservice teachers in K-12 public schools, who had demonstrated subject matter knowledge, as per the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), were eligible to enter a two-year university intern program and apply for an intern credential. Currently California Sate University Dominguez Hills's (CSUDH) special education credential population was overwhelmingly comprised of inservice candidates ($N = 546$; 99%) who were simultaneously faced with the realities of teaching in multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, economically impoverished classrooms and university coursework demands.

Innovative Model

In an effort to better serve the school districts within its service area and the unique credential candidate population, CSUDH implemented an accelerated alternative certification program based upon the Professional Development School (PDS) model (OSEP Grant H325h010142), hereinafter referred to as SPED PDS. During the 2002–2003 academic year, 58 SPED inservice teachers from four local partnering school districts entered this program. In keeping with the PDS equity agenda, the grant sought to: (a) assist high need, low performing, Title 1 districts in the recruitment, preparation, and retention of K–12 special

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educators; (b) assist inservice teachers by providing an accelerated credential program that prepared them to work in multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, economically poor settings; (c) increase student achievement; and (d) validate the application of the PDS model to SPED alternative certification programs.

Program Features

Program Components

This SPED PDS is similar to traditional PDS models in the following aspects:

1. *Collaboratively Designed and Implemented:* A formal agreement between four local school districts and the university existed. Program design and implementation was overseen at local PDS sites by a university coordinator, a district coordinator, and an advisory committee. Coordinators meet monthly, with advisory board meetings held fall and spring semesters.

2. *District and University Instructional Teams:* Instructional teams comprised of both district and university faculty members implemented curriculum specific to the district's diverse population and they provided multiple opportunities for candidates to relate theory to classroom practices. These instructional teams bridged the gap between theory and practice.

3. *Field Work and Support:* The program supported candidates with subject matter preparation, scholarships for books and tuition, and identification and training of seasoned teachers who mentored candidates. Two semesters of fieldwork were monitored by university faculty, school site administrators, and PDS instructional teams. University coordinators provided on-site weekly advisement.

4. *Cohort Centered:* Candidates were grouped in educational cohorts consisting of 15 to 25 candidates who provided peer-support in both learning and work contexts.

Coursework for the SPED PDS and campus programs did not differ. Both required two courses addressing the needs of diverse K-12 students: *Multi-cultural Perspectives* and *Language Acquisition.* However, the grant specified that PDS candidates work in diverse settings and provided multiple op-

portunities to refine skills specific to this population.

This SPED PDS departed from traditional PDS models in that: (a) the program was an accelerated (3 semesters) 44 unit post-baccalaureate degree; (b) candidates were uncertified, fully employed, in-service teachers; and (c) fieldwork was completed in candidates own classrooms.

Outcome Data

Program Productivity Data

The following numbers reflect program completion and retention outcomes for the 2002–2003 academic year: 58 candidates entered the program and at the time of this writing 39 (66%) applied for their preliminary credential, 8 (14%) applied for their intern credential, 27 (46%) completed the program within the expected timeframe (3 semesters), and 12 (20%) completed the program one semester beyond the timeframe. Of the 11 (19%) candidates who have yet to complete the program, 9 (82%) are still enrolled, indicating a high program retention rate. Currently, all candidates are still teaching in the field of special education in their initial multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, economically poor urban settings. Completions rates (PDS vs. campus) cannot reasonably be compared because PDS candidates were guaranteed access to credential courses while campus candidates were not. Furthermore, funding for PDS candidates was continent upon 2 years of service following credential issuance.

Program Costs

PDS program costs were greater than campus program costs. Among the additional grant-funded direct costs were tuition, subject matter preparation courses, supervision, smaller class sizes, faculty release time for coordination and recruitment, and administrative support staff.

Participant Perception Data

The primary goal of the grant was the preparation and retention of qualified special education teachers. The use of candidates as data sources was particularly relevant to the

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Table 1. PDS-Exit Survey Items Specific to Diverse Setting

PDS-Post Survey (N = 49)	2003
Field work prepared me to:	
work with students from diverse backgrounds	1.69
work with families from diverse backgrounds	1.88
collaborate with colleagues from diverse backgrounds	1.73
Curriculum prepared me to:	
address issues of equity and access to knowledge by diverse learners	1.44
provided me with skills necessary to motivate low-achieving students	1.58

Table 2. Special Education Exit Survey Items Specific to Program Preparation

Exit Survey Items	PDS n = 55	On-Campus n = 23
The program prepared me:		
1. to meet the educational needs of urban and diverse populations	1.60	2.04
2. with the skills necessary to perform my job	1.73	1.78
3. to organize and manage an educational setting	1.75	1.91
4. to be confident, responsive, and supportive in interactions with parents and community	1.73	1.96
5. with content knowledge necessary to perform my job	1.58	1.83
6. to meet the standards of my profession	1.63	1.74
7. to utilize technology effectively in my profession	2.18	2.61
8. to be effective at promoting student learning	1.69	1.74

SPED PDS program because they were currently teaching full-time and had first-hand knowledge of the impact of their own preparation. PDS candidates completed three surveys: PDS-Entry (program perceptions), PDS-Exit (based on National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] standards), and SPED-Exit (specific to the university SPED program). Responses from PDS-Entry surveys indicated that *Financial Scholarship; Necessity to Earn a Credential* and the *Accelerated Rate of Program* were primary factors in PDS participation. *Intensity of Program, Time Commitment,* and *Motivation* were the most frequently identified challenges.

The PDS-Exit survey items required candidates to rate (on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 = Very effective to 5 = Very Ineffective) the effectiveness of the PDS program in preparing them to meet specific NCATE standards. Both cohorts indicated PDS courses and field experiences effectively prepared them to meet the demands of multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, economically poor urban settings. Table 1 displays response means for items related to diverse settings.

The SPED-Exit survey asked candidates to rate the effectiveness of their preparation on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Very effective to 5 = Very Ineffective). The survey was administered to both PDS and on-campus candidate populations. Table 2 provides comparisons of mean scores on eight items with both populations indicating that they felt effec-

tively prepared to meet the demands of K–12 diverse settings.

Discussion and Recommendations

Success of the Program

Two significant outcomes to date were program effectiveness and completion rates. PDS and on-campus candidates perceived their preparation to be highly effective as indicated by self-reported survey data. PDS rates were slightly higher than on-campus rates, but both were within the Very Effective and Effective ranges. Field experience supervisors' evaluations supported candidate's assertions that they were effectively prepared to work in urban settings. Triangulation of additional data from survey items regarding candidates' program satisfaction levels, focus groups, observations of candidates in courses and K–12 settings, would yield a more robust data set from which to make program improvements.

Completion rates based on expected time to program completion were lower than projected. Subject matter competency (a requirement for the SPED-PDS field experience) may have impacted this rate; of the 58

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in-service teachers, 16 (28%) have yet to fulfill this requirement. As of 2004, subject matter competency is a California State University system entrance requirement, so accelerated programs may want to consider subject matter competency when screening candidates for admission. Additional factors related to completion rate may have included passing the Reading Instruction Competency Assessment (RICA), the demands of full-time teaching, and the intensity of the accelerated program.

Based on survey results, two areas for improvement were identified: utilizing technology effectively and working with families from diverse backgrounds. Similar results were noted on all college program exit surveys. Technology was currently being infused in all credential courses. And the program was exploring options to address diverse family issues. Candidates also identified the need for IEP development and implementation information earlier in the program. To this end, the course specific to this topic was moved from the Spring semester to the Fall semester.

Implications for the Field

Although initial indicators document the program's effectiveness, additional data from a prolonged study of this model are needed to support application of the PDS model to SPED alternative certification programs designed to prepare teachers for diverse urban settings.

References

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