# Creating Highly Qualified Teachers for Urban Schools

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**Abstract**

*This article describes a design for a teacher preparation program that is successfully preparing teacher candidates to teach in the complex, diverse classrooms in urban schools. The program provides intensive, authentic, field-based experiences and effective mentoring support for teacher candidates as they gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for successful teaching. The authors examine the perceptions of participants in this program to discover strengths and weaknesses of the program, the experiences the teacher candidates found beneficial, and the trends in performance of the teacher candidates on the Praxis II Exams. Findings from multiple open-ended surveys, Likert Scale ratings, and focus group interviews are presented. Teacher candidates clearly articulate that they are well prepared to begin a career in teaching as a result of participating in this teacher preparation program. Recommendations for program improvement are presented in order to increase the recruitment and retention of teachers into the teaching profession.*

## Introduction

In a meta-analysis that focused on empirical studies of teacher quality and qualifications, Rice (2003) named five broad categories that appear to contribute to teacher quality: (1) experience, (2) preparation programs and degrees, (3) type of certification, (4) coursework taken in preparation for the profession, and (5) teachers' own test scores. Wayne and Youngs (2003) also targeted teacher quality in their analysis of studies that examined the characteristics of effective teachers and their link to student achievement. Similarly, Wayne and Youngs examined ratings of teachers' undergraduate institutions, teachers' test scores, degrees and coursework, and certification status. They concluded "students learn more from teachers with certain characteristics" (p. 100-101). As mandated by *No Child Left Behind* and as the demand for highly qualified teachers who can teach in complex, urban settings intensifies, the traditional structures and approaches to teacher preparation programs come into question. Teachers are faced with educating students who have diverse needs and come from diverse, complex backgrounds. The concern at this time appears to be focused on urban schools, particularly those that are failing to bring about successful achievement scores for these urban learners. In order to ensure success for all students, teachers must be well prepared and possess those "certain characteristics" to face the challenges of ensuring that all students achieve. Goodlad (1990) states, "Few matters are more important than the quality of the teachers in our nation's schools" (p. xi). Arturo Pacheco (2000), in his address to the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, echoes Goodlad's conclusions and reminds teacher educators, "Better teachers lead to better schools" (p. 8).

Various professional organizations including, among others, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and the Association of Teacher Educators, have adopted policy positions regarding elementary teacher education and teacher licensure. While institutions of higher education scramble to meet revised state and national standards, these positions demand incorporating a more integrated knowledge base and instructional applications in programs for prospective teachers. New elemen-

tary teacher licensure standards reflect a national trend towards a more integrated view of both early and middle grades curriculum and instruction. This growing consensus, informed by research and tested through practice, echoes the 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. The report indicated that teachers need more than content knowledge and that a special blend of content and pedagogy is essential for teachers to be effective. The report further pointed to a need for teacher candidates to develop curricular practices that accommodate student diversity, develop the habits of reflective practitioners, and gain a fuller understanding of the teacher's changing roles.

Johnson (2001) reports that new teachers are leaving the field in record numbers and Pipho (1998) adds "in some states and in some urban areas the teacher shortage is dire." Tye and O'Brien (2002) warn that some teachers experience feelings of alienation, isolation, normlessness, powerlessness, and meaninglessness that are found in many urban school environments and drive teachers to pursue degrees in other areas. The authors posit that changing student characteristics, negativity, and pressure from parents and the community, along with student apathy and parent hostility contribute to a decreased teacher work force. In order for teachers to perform well in urban settings they "must be responsive to the different environments children are in and resourceful in getting the financial and human resources necessary to teach children in those different environments" (Reading Today, 2003, p.3). Further, the article points out that "preservice education should prepare new teachers for culture shock they will face." Urban schools have proven to be a challenge for veteran teachers but can be particularly intimidating for beginning teachers. The emphasis in a second *Reading Today* article (2003) highlights that poverty and lack of adequate health care for students and their families living in poverty have a significant impact on learning. Not only are beginning teachers struggling to learn the curriculum, they also must deal with lack of parent involvement and students who have been raised in a culture that often lacks parental supervision. Many, but not all, urban students come to school without proper food, clothing, and supplies. Many times, medical care has been inadequate. Urban school students come from low socio-economic backgrounds where the adult(s) in the house may be at work and unable to provide the academic and emotional support needed in order for a student to become successful in school. New teachers are often ill-prepared for such children and their problems. This causes many new teachers leave the profession due to their inability to cope with these urban conditions.

The problems of recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers for demanding urban teaching situations is a challenge for every institution that offers teacher education. One college has tackled these challenges by adopting as its initial focus the improvement of its teacher education program for the purposes of ensuring (1) a diverse and high-quality approach to teacher preparation that involves solid K–12/postsecondary partnerships, strong field experience in urban schools, and good support for new teachers; and (2) that teacher recruitment and retention policies target the schools of greatest need (usually Title 1 urban schools) and the teachers most likely to staff them successfully. In an effort to offer a comprehensive teacher preparation program aligned with college goals and *NCLB* requirements, the Elementary Education Program at this university was redesigned and emerged after substantial changes as the Integrative Studies Major Program leading to a Bachelor of Science in Education (B.S. Ed.) degree.

## The Research Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teacher candidates who participated in the Integrative Studies Major Program leading to elementary teaching licensure in early and middle grades (K–8). The Integrative Studies Major Program replaced the previous program with more field-based coursework situated in urban schools, extended classroom participation in an urban Professional Development School (PDS), an integrated methods block class of 12

hours taken the semester before student teaching (designated as an internship), and student teaching in the same urban PDS for at least seven or eight weeks of the 15-week student teaching experience. The same classroom teachers and the same university professor, who was one of the authors of this article, mentored these students during internship and for one student teaching placement in this program. Student teaching second placements were in suburban or rural schools in order to expand the experiences of the teacher candidates and because not *all* our graduates would stay in urban schools. The State Board of Education dictated the requirement of two different placements.

Data regarding the perceptions of the participants involved in this program were gathered and analyzed for program evaluation purposes. In addition to the formative evaluation data aimed at determining how the program functioned and how it can be improved to better achieve its goals, data were gathered and examined to determine the effectiveness of the teacher education program in helping prospective teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to develop an understanding of teaching in urban schools. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the teacher candidates' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the Integrative Studies Major Program?
2. What experiences do teacher candidates find most beneficial in their preparation to become teachers during their internship and student teaching semesters in the Integrative Studies Major Program?
3. What are the trends in performance on the Praxis II Exam over time for elementary licensure teacher candidates?

**The Integrative Studies Major Program**

The central mission of the Integrative Studies Major Program is the preparation of educational leaders, primarily for urban classrooms. The program is designed to prepare teachers who are able to maximize the development and learning of all children and emphasizes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions as set out in the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards. The program integrates courses in mathematics, literacy, science, social studies, and fine arts to provide a solid core of knowledge for teacher candidates. Beginning teacher education classes have numerous field components, all situated in urban classrooms. The cultural diversity strand runs through all coursework, giving the students a strong background along with hands-on experience working with culturally diverse students. Moving into the final semesters, the program involves teacher candidates working closely in cohorts with their peers and with university professors, attending integrated course classes together (commonly referred to as " block" classes), as well as working and teaching for more than 100 hours in an urban PDS as an intern assigned to a mentor teacher. This component emphasizes knowledge of K–8 learners in an urban setting, integration of curriculum, student learning and cognition along with content area curriculum, use of technology, and adaptations for students with special needs. The student teaching component of this program includes one placement (typically eight weeks) in the same PDS where teacher candidates are familiar with mentor teachers, students, and school routines, and a second placement (seven weeks) in an alternate school setting, as required by state licensing regulations. This alternate setting is usually in a suburban or rural setting and often it is the only time these students visit "non-urban" schools.

The urban schools in which our students are placed for observation, field experiences, and internship are generally Title 1 schools. The student population of these urban schools is 93.6% African American and the schools are designated as economically disadvantaged. Most children in these schools come from nontraditional families. Many students live with someone other than their parents, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. While this program is most beneficial for those individuals planning to teach in urban schools, it is generally held that if they can make it as teachers is these difficult schools, they can teach any-

where and some of our students do choose to teach in suburban and rural schools.

## Methodology

This study had a qualitative research design with Likert Scale data included, in conjunction with open-ended surveys and taped focus group interviews as the data collection formats for answering the research questions. According to Merriam (1998), "Meaning is embedded in the peoples' experiences" (p. 6). Seidman (1998) reports that at the root of the research "is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). Since this study sought to answer questions related to the unique experiences of teacher candidates participating in the Integrative Studies Program and attempted to understand what these experiences meant to them, it was appropriate to center this inquiry in qualitative research methodology.

Study participants included a nonrandom sample of 27 teacher candidates (25 females, 2 males). The students were enrolled in the Integrative Studies Major Professional Education Block for fall (referred to as internship semester) and in student teaching during the spring semester. Participants completed written surveys at the end of the fall internship semester and again at the end of the spring student teaching semester. In addition, a randomly selected group of teacher candidates participated in focus group interviews at the end of the internship semester and again at the end of the student teaching semester. A constant comparative data analysis method that involved comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences was used in this study (Merriam, 1998). Data were unitized into the smallest meaning units, coded, grouped together for similarities, assigned category names, and then examined and compared for recurring patterns and emerging themes. All surveys were anonymous and coded for organizational purposes only with participants granting written permission to be interviewed.

Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of internship and again at the end of student teaching. Teacher candidates were asked to volunteer for the focus group interviews. Those participants who appeared at the scheduled time were interviewed. These interviews were treated as conversations in which respondents were asked to describe their perceptions of the Integrative Studies Major Program and their experiences in the program. Interviews were open-ended so that the respondents could frame their answers in their personal style. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and participation in the study was voluntary. All responses were coded for confidentiality and kept in a secured location. The first focus group interview was conducted by one of the professors teaching in the program. A professor in the department who was not a part of this particular program conducted the second focus group interview.

In order to determine the degree of improvement in student knowledge and skills for teaching others, university students' performance scores on the Praxis II exam (taken prior to the student teaching semester) were extracted from the College of Education's database and were examined for changes over succeeding years. This analysis is an ongoing process and will continue for several years. Data available at the time of this study include three years of scores from those students who completed the program. Tracking of students for five years after graduation will be attempted by establishing mail and email addresses whereby students can be contacted for follow-up and longitudinal effects of the program and determination of retention rates in the teaching profession.

## Findings

*Survey Responses*

Twenty-seven (27) interns responded to initial surveys administered at the end of the fall semester. The return rate was 100% as the surveys were completed during class time. Nineteen (19) student teachers responded to the identical second survey administered during the final weeks of student teaching (spring semester). Participants were given surveys during a seminar class and asked to return them at the next class meeting.

Some students forgot to return surveys after several reminders; therefore, the return rate for student teaching surveys was 70%.

*Strengths.* When asked to discuss the strengths of the Integrative Studies Program, the majority of responses reflected students' acknowledgement of the value of the intensity and depth of classroom experience. One intern stated, "It provides future teachers with the best opportunity to observe and absorb the teaching profession." The other prominent responses indicated that in addition to having support from their peers, they had an expert team of university and classroom professionals to help them. Interns reported generally they were able to see best practice in operation, and that they had begun to understand the concept and advantages of an integrated curriculum.

Ten of the 19 student teachers reported that peer interaction was one of the most important pieces of the entire program. Others believed that the hands-on approach to the program was very beneficial. One student teacher summed it up:

> Many hours of observation and hands-on experience with students during the methods block helped tremendously to prepare me for my student teaching. In fact, it was almost as if I was already doing my student teaching and being able to learn as I went along.

Other student teachers reported learning a variety of teaching strategies and understanding how to construct effective lesson plans as particularly valuable. Six student teachers indicated the time they spent in classrooms with students was the program's main strength.

*Weaknesses*. Teacher candidates also discussed the weaknesses of the program. Interns, in general, reported becoming "overwhelmed" with the workload of the block. They characterized some of the work as busy work and not connected to the real world of teaching. Interns were concerned about professors' personalities, differences in teaching styles, and several instances of miscommunication between professors and students.

In the spring administration of the survey, one issue of concern was that teacher candidates were required to take and pass the Praxis II Exam before beginning their student teaching semester. They recognized that the college requirement of taking the exam before completing their most advanced coursework was a disadvantage for them. One student teacher expressed the opinion that a weakness of the program was the quality of the school in which students were placed for their internship semester. (The school that hosted the block experienced controversy during the semester, creating a negative school climate for the university students and professors.) Another student complained that they were not familiar with the textbooks used in the classrooms. Student teachers had limited access to teacher manuals as there were a limited number. In addition, because of the neighborhood in which the school was situated, student teachers were forced to leave the school early in the afternoon, thus limiting further their access to textbooks. Student teachers were able to compare their knowledge and skills with student teachers from other university programs and believed that they were generally better capable of handling the demands of the classroom.

*Benefits of the Program*

When asked what they found beneficial during their internships, the 27 teacher candidates commented on their development and understanding of students, schools, and cultures.

*Mentors and cooperating teachers.* In general, interns viewed working with mentor teachers as very important to their development. One teacher candidate responded:

> I enjoyed being able to work with one mentor teacher so that I was able to see the workings of her class from the first bell in the morning to the last bell of the day. It allowed me to see what the 'real' school day is like.

Interns were asked to describe their relationships with their mentor teachers. Twenty-three of the 27 interns reported having had a positive experience. While a small portion of the mentor-intern partnerships were less positive, some

remarks indicated there was still much to learn from those partnerships. Intern 20 wrote that her mentor was "more like a peer.... We got along as people, but I do not admire this person as a teacher. I usually take notes on what not to do."

Participants described how their mentors and cooperating teachers helped them to improve their teaching. Participants generally agreed that they learned the craft of teaching through their work with the experienced teachers. The majority of interns valued and commented how mentors answered questions and explained the *whats and whys* of teaching. They provided interns with opportunities to "get a feel for how to run the classroom." Cooperating teachers in the spring semester of student teaching were also noted for helping their student teachers in much the same ways. A student teacher responded, "Feedback, feedback, feedback. She's like a mirror so that I can see what I'm doing and find the areas needing improvement."

As student teachers, the teacher candidates' remarks were more holistically reflective, and comments indicated additional benefits of the integrative program that were not emphasized in the fall survey. Specifically, the student teachers valued their relationships with those cooperating teachers who had extensive knowledge about teaching. Others indicated student teaching expanded their experiences to different areas of teaching. A student teacher explained, "I learned so many things through planning, teaching, and observing. I got a feel for different grades and the difference it made and the impact it had on my teaching style."

*A cohort of peers.* A dominant theme among the open-ended comments was the support the candidates received from their peers in the Integrative Studies Program. Twenty-seven men and women spent from August until May working as a cohort. While there were personality conflicts and cliques as would be expected with a group this large and mostly young, the interns developed lasting bonds and indicated they shared ideas and collaborated on coursework and classroom work.

> The people around me were always supportive. When my lesson bombed, my peers offered help and understanding. When I was not feeling well, they helped me. When I didn't write my lessons/objectives to the standards, my peers offered feedback prior to me turning them in. We all seemed to bond despite all of our differences.

This peer support transcended the program experience and extended into students' personal lives. One student wrote of the support she received when "personal problems outside of the block developed." Another intern wrote, "This is the key to the block. Everyone is going through the same experience, being able to share experiences from the classroom and share ideas—this makes the block a better learning environment. Support, encouragement, and trust are the key." Some interns took a negative perspective of the block, however, and reported that the stress, gossip, and cliques among students discouraged them. As student teachers, the participants reported searching out each other with their problems. They continued to listen to each other, giving help and ideas when needed. In one student teacher's words, "If I need any one of them, I can call on them and they will respond positively to me."

*Working with parents.* Both interns and student teachers reported that they had very few opportunities to work with parents. Parent contact during internship was in the form of parents coming to the classroom door and asking a question. During student teaching, participants had more opportunities to interact with parents. Eight of the 19 student teachers indicated they had participated in parent-teacher conferences and found the experience beneficial.

*Classroom experience.* The majority of the interns stated that their "time in the classroom" was the most beneficial element to their development. One intern summed up the benefits of hands-on experience:

> Spending time in an elementary school helped to apply new knowledge to real situations rather than learning teaching theories/prac-

> tices completely separate from an elementary school setting.

*Instructional strategies.* Participants were asked how the program enabled them to use a variety of instructional methods in their teaching. Twenty-six of the interns expressed appreciation for learning how to write lessons using the six models of instruction they had been taught during the methods block. They described the models as helping them make lessons "interesting," "exciting," and "meaningful."

*Classroom management.* When asked how the program enabled them to manage classrooms and deal effectively with discipline problems, the interns reported that they understood how to implement discipline procedures and manage a classroom but they expressed awareness of the need for even more day-to-day experience. One student wrote, "The program's lectures can give me ideas on ways to use management and discipline techniques, but being in the classroom helped me find what was and was not going to work for me." When student teaching, the teacher candidates reported being confident classroom managers and in control in their classrooms.

*Questioning strategies.* An emphasis in this program was learning to fashion teaching using higher-level thinking, reasoning, and teaching for understanding. Student teachers reported that they felt capable of using open-ended questions and discovery lessons that required students to actively think and question in order to learn. The teacher candidates in this program also commented that they learned the importance of alternative assessment and reported using a variety of assessment tools to evaluate student learning during student teaching.

*Self reflection.* Teacher candidates were asked to reflect about their teaching on an almost daily basis. As a result of this practice, interns' comments indicated they appreciated the importance of reflection:

> Each day after being in the classroom I would leave immediately thinking about what worked and what didn't work. We have been so entrenched in the profession that we are learning … how to think like a teacher. I am able to evaluate myself and find ways to fine-tune my delivery and approach.

Student teachers reported that they transferred this practice and used reflection on a daily basis to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and to improve their teaching.

*Time management.* Participants were queried as to how the program enabled them to balance the varied demands of teaching. Interns responded that they "became more flexible," "more prepared and they learned "to juggle time requirements." They wrote that they became aware of "**all** a teacher does." One student teacher commented, "There is so much included in teaching that there is not a university course for.… Student teaching has exposed me to this and I'm glad because I'd be shocked, once in my own classroom, having to do all of the paperwork."

*Lesson planning.* The participants were asked how the Integrative Studies Program enabled them to develop long and short range plans to meet the needs of students. According to their comments, they learned how to "set realistic goals for themselves and their students." Student teachers discussed planning lessons and units to meet the needs of all students. One student teacher explained: "I am able to think further ahead to the big picture and able to plan the little parts to get there."

*Becoming educational leaders.* Finally, teacher candidates were asked how the program had enabled them to become effective leaders, a major goal of the program. An intern wrote:

> I have learned diplomacy by working in cooperative groups and I have learned a sense of urgency for the importance of teaching… These two things together make me want to step up and do what needs to be done, especially when children's education is involved.

After completing their internships, several students responded that they had "confidence," "knowledge," and "experience." In addition, they

felt they had developed a sense of "responsible, open-minded honesty." Some interns admitted that although they perceived that they had the skills to be a leader, they were unsure because they had not yet had "their own classroom." One intern commented:

> This program has taught me that leadership comes in many forms. It does not simply mean standing in front of the room and dictating to students. Effective leadership in the classroom is a mindset that creates an environment that is most conducive to learning and meeting the needs of the students.

Again, as student teachers, the preponderance of the participants expressed that they felt the program enabled them to become leaders. Only one student teacher wrote that she did not feel like a leader.

*Preparation to teach.* Interns and student teachers were asked how well the Integrative Studies Program prepared them to begin a career in teaching. Fifteen of the 27 interns responded that they felt well prepared as a result of the program. One intern expressed these thoughts:

> We were phased in and out of the classroom, so we could test the ideas being taught in our classes. If you can't test it, then how do you know it will work? I learned more in this one semester than any other courses I have taken previously because the information actually was applied to a real life situation.

Interns remarked that they recognized the value of being in the classroom as compared to "just observing one or two hours" as in the former program. Comparing it to the medical model, an intern replied, "It is the best preparation. I can't fathom another means of preparing future teachers for their profession. Doctors and nurses spend years in the profession studying as interns. It seemed illogical for teachers not to do the same thing."

**Likert Scale Survey Results**

In addition to the open-ended comments on the surveys, participants were asked to complete Likert scale ratings of 11 statements representing factors impacting their experience in the Integrated Studies program. Table 1 lists the factors and the mean ratings. A rating of 1 indicated the most negative impact and a rating of 5 indicated the most positive impact. In the fall, the most positive ratings were given to the quality of instruction in the block methods courses (4.59) and the quality of the internship experience (4.41). These same factors also received the highest positive ratings in the spring (4.79 and 4.83). The factors having most negative impact were availability and use of technology (1.6 in fall) and school pressures (2.93) in the spring.

Table 1
***Intern/Student Teacher Ratings***

Scale

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 = major negative impact | 3 = neutral impact | 5 = major positive impact |
| 2 = some negative impact | 4 = some positive impact | 6 = don't know |

Listed below are some factors that affect you as a preservice teacher. For each of the factors, please use the scale provided to rate your experience in the Integrative Studies Major Program. Spaces are provided for your comments.

| Statement | Mean Rating Intern | Mean Rating Student Teacher |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Time required to do the work. | 2.65 | 3.79 |
| 2. The need for assistance from mentor teachers. | 4.03 | 4.38 |
| 3. The effect on the culture and climate of your school. | 3.69 | 4.38 |
| 4. Work pressure: meetings, deadlines, and paperwork requirements in the school. | 2.60 | 3.21 |
| 5. School pressure: classes, deadlines, and paperwork requirements for university. | 2.55 | 2.93 |
| 6. The effect on the quality of instruction in your school. | 3.36 | 4.36 |
| 7. The quality of instruction of your university block classes. | 4.59 | 4.79 |
| 8. The quality of supervision by university professors. | 4.26 | 4.31 |
| 9. The quality of supervision by mentor teachers. | 4.08 | 4.64 |
| 10. The quality of your internship experience. | 4.41 | 4.83 |
| 11. The availability and use of technology in the school. | 1.6 | 3.77 |

*Focus Group Interviews*

Focus group interviews were conducted with interns at the end of the block semester and at end of the student teaching semester to determine candidates' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of the block methods semester (fall), the student teaching semester (spring), and to gather suggestions for improvement of the Integrative Studies Major Program. The interviews were taped and data obtained through these focus group sessions were analyzed for themes and discrepancies. Participants were asked to sign a Consent Agreement Form, informed that the interview was being recorded by tape, and verbally assured that their identities would not be revealed in any reports related to the program evaluation. Five interns were interviewed at the end of the block semester for the purposes of this study. They met on the university campus and were interviewed by a university professor not directly involved with the program. At the end of the second semester, four candidates completing their student teaching were interviewed following the same procedure.

*Advantages.* Interns were asked what they perceived to be the advantages of the block program over a traditional teacher education program. One intern explained what the candidates agreed was the major advantage:

> "What we learn in class we go out and use the next day. Instead of it just being teacher-tell, you use that strategy to see if it will work in your classroom."

Interns also liked being assigned to one class with one mentor teacher and one group of students. They felt comfortable in their classrooms and did not have to worry about getting to know different teachers, students, and routines. Another advantage was that interns were at the school site all day and experienced "everything that goes on" in the school. They were "not there for two hours on Friday ... and [saw] the same thing over and over." Interns also found advantage in the immediate feedback and consultation they received from mentors and university professors:

> When we did lesson plans in other classes, my professors just said what was wrong with it. I want to know why. . . like why it won't work in a classroom. Being able to have my professors correct it and then going into the classroom and teaching it, brought a lot of enlightenment into everything.

Interns were asked how the Integrative Studies Major program helped prepare them for teaching in an urban environment. Through their stories, it became clear that because of their extended experiences in the classrooms they began to connect with their students in unexpected ways and found that many of their life experiences were similar. They found that these urban students suffered losses (of parents or loved ones) and financial difficulties just as some of the candidates did when they were young. Teacher candidates reported that they now understood that appropriate social skills along with cooperation had to be taught as many students had not been exposed to an appropriate model before entering school. (During debriefing sessions with professors, students often spoke about how shocked they were at the home environment from which their students came, and how their lives outside of school were filled with difficult circumstances such as parents in prison, parents who were deceased, little food or basic necessities.)

*Benefits.* When asked what they found beneficial about the program, interns' comments reflected the primary themes they had expressed in their written responses on the survey. Specifically, they commented on creating and teaching the thematic unit because "it was the first time I ever got to see my lesson plan from its inception to its grading." In addition, the six instructional models taught during the block expanded their knowledge base and understanding of effective lesson delivery. Interns also found beneficial the relationships they developed with their peers and professors. They knew they could call on others for help when needed. Being exposed to special education issues was also beneficial to the interns. Interns learned to adjust lessons plans to fit the needs of all learners. Interns found the merger of the block classes beneficial (as opposed to separate methods classes in the former program). "It just all flowed together and it helped so much" is how one intern described it. Another commented on how beneficial it was to be at the school site. "It was neat to see how the principal did her job and how everybody needs to work together and how the teachers plan together...."

*Weaknesses.* Interns reported that some assignments were not useful to them, and they felt they should be downsized or eliminated. The professors worked to eliminate redundancy in assignments after the semester was over. Other participants were concerned that the teacher practitioners from the school site were not qualified to teach a component of the block, nor did the practitioners have time to prepare properly for teaching university students because of all of their other responsibilities. (Two teacher practitioners agreed to co-teach the social studies component of the block along with one of the professors. However, the professor discovered later in the semester that one of the practitioners would come to class ill-prepared.) Interns also objected to the point grading system, finding that the points were too high, that the work was too time consuming for the number of points they received, and that points were not distributed equally among assignments and throughout the semester. Again professors worked to equalize points so as to be more equitable.

*Suggested improvements.* Interns felt the grading system should be changed, but they were unable to suggest another way to make it fair and

equitable. They also suggested having the opportunity to rewrite assignments after receiving feedback from professors. One professor did this and it seemed to have worked well. They wanted this process to be a policy. Third, interns suggested the professors teaching in the block should have more communication with each other and more consistency with their expectations and policies.

**Student Teacher Responses**

The focus group interview of student teachers was conducted with four female students in May 2002 at the University. The interviewees had just completed their student teaching placements. A University professor not associated with the program conducted the one and a half hour interview and followed the same procedures as in the fall.

*Positive experiences.* The students agreed (100%) with obvious enthusiasm that the Integrative Studies Program was a positive experience for them overall. Their responses were more strongly positive for the block semester (fall) than for the student teaching semester. As one student said, "The block was awesome, but the student teaching semester needs to be revised." Their comments, however, addressed strengths and weaknesses in both semesters and were actually more critical of particulars in the block semester (see following sections). The students also agreed that their goals and expectations for their preparation to assume careers as elementary teachers were fully met through this program.

All students emphatically agreed that the primary advantages for them were the level of confidence they had developed in classroom management and the extent of opportunity to see and learn what schools were "really like." Because many of them had been able to see the first days of the beginning of a school year, they felt like they knew how "to get started on the right foot." As a consequence of the extended time spent in one school, one student explained: "We don't feel so helpless because we have some 'tools' to fix problems when they come up." Another student continued with the tools metaphor: "In our toolbox we have lots of strategies. We know how to modify instruction when students are struggling; we know how to assess; to use tests as a tool; how to interpret tests; how to question; how to focus on students' problems and set our objectives to match them."

Another advantage of the Integrative Studies Major Program that students discussed was having a cohort of peers with whom they spent a lot of time and shared common experiences. Although the block semester's class was fairly large (27) and the common meeting space (classroom) at the school was described as small, the students did not perceive these factors as disadvantages. One student explained: "If someone started to get on your nerves, you weren't stuck with them. There were plenty of others to interact with for a while. We already knew a lot of the people from previous classes anyway, so it wasn't like having to start from scratch to get to know 26 strangers." Another student said, "Having 26 other people with me since August helped me a lot. In the old program, you would be lucky if you got to student teaching and the seminar with it and knew anyone."

The students who had the same professors both for the block semester and for university supervisor for the student teaching semester indicated that this was also an advantage. One student explained: "I felt OK in student teaching semester when Professor X came to see me, because she knew me and what I was able and capable of doing. Of course, it worked the other way, too. When I wasn't necessarily at my best, she knew that, too, and that motivated me."

In summarizing their perceptions of the most beneficial aspects of the program, the students decided that they could sum up their opinions with "C" words. They felt "*confident*" to enter the student teaching semester; they liked the "*cohort*" concept of both students and professors working together and indicated that it provided "*cohesiveness*" for them; the "*consistency*" of lesson plans and portfolios required by professors and mentor teachers made them "*comfortable*" and provided "*continuity*" for moving through the different levels of experiences in the block semester and into student teaching. Searching for one last "C"

word and not finding the exact one, the students concluded by explaining that the site-based program was the "real world" and that it was no longer mysterious for them. In the words of one student: "We found out that we could help kids and that if we could do it here and now, we could do it anywhere, anytime."

*Negative experiences.* The students were in somewhat less agreement as to the perceived disadvantages of the Integrative Studies Major Program. For some, the new program presented increased financial hardships. University tuition was significantly increased during this academic year. Traveling to an inner-city school some distance from the main campus required additional transportation costs and arrangements; and, because students are required to be on site for a full day, every day, most were not able to work for the full year. Those who were able to keep some limited work schedules were at a real disadvantage for keeping up with their school requirements. In addition, students had only limited access to materials and supplies provided through the school, as budgets were very tight in the school system. If students wanted to make or do something extra to support their instruction, they felt limited both by school funds and personal finances for money they might have otherwise spent for copying, laminating, and supplies. Students complained, also, that some professors required textbooks that were never used during the year.

Students were critical of the block semester for its follow-through from the "methods instruction" to the application in the classrooms. The students expressed their confidence in their university professors, their expertise, and their knowledge of current best practices taught in the methods instruction. However, when they went into the classrooms, they did not see or experience what the university professors had taught as current best practices, but rather more traditional instruction. Students were confused because they were not sure who was correct—the research-based theory or the classroom teachers.

A related concern raised during the discussion was the selection of schools and the level of professionalism of teachers in those schools selected for program experiences. Students reported that there were instances when they were made to feel uncomfortable by faculty members because of their race. Some classroom teachers sometimes took advantage of them and left them for extended periods of time as the responsible adult in the classroom, and some mentor teachers (who had not attended the preparatory mentoring sessions) were not aware of what their responsibilities were or what the expectations were for the university students while in their classrooms. Although the students expressed their awareness that 27 extra people (in addition to several professors in and out of classrooms over a semester) would have definite impact on a school environment and could be intrusive, they also felt they had a lot to offer to teachers in their knowledge of current best practices and that some of the tensions they experienced should be addressed and focused on in future collaborations between schools and the University.

Although students expressed their high levels of confidence in entering the student teaching semester as a consequence of the extended time and prior experience they had in the fall semester, they also indicated there were areas in their elementary content knowledge where they still felt uncomfortable. One student indicated she lacked confidence in teaching reading in kindergarten and first grade because of her inadequate knowledge of phonics, and another expressed her concern that she felt weak in content knowledge at upper grade levels. (One of her student teaching experiences was in seventh grade pre-algebra classes.) In her words, "The content at the higher grade level was very challenging. I wasn't confident at all in dealing with some of the questions the students asked."

*Praxis Scores*

The State Department of Education requires that all teacher candidates take the Praxis II Series Exams in order to obtain licensure to teach. The Praxis II Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers was developed and administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). Teach-

er candidates are required to take and pass the following exams: 1) Test 0522, Principles of Learning and Teaching in Grades K–6; 2) Test 0012, Elementary Education, Content Area Exercises; 3) Test 011, Elementary Education, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; and 4) Test 014, Elementary Education, Content Knowledge or Test 0146, Middle School, Content Knowledge. Tests 014 and 0146 scores were currently being normed. Although teacher candidates are required to take one of the tests, these scores did not affect licensure at this time.

At this University, time requirements for passing the Praxis II (see Table 2 and 3) have shifted and may have affected reported scores. The university policy stated that students can graduate with a degree in Elementary Education/Integrative Studies but cannot receive state teacher licensure until they pass the three Praxis II exams. Later, the University added the stipulation that candidates must take and pass all tests before they are allowed to student teach. This stipulation proved to be a disadvantage, as it required students to take the Praxis II exams before they had taken their methods classes. The following spring this stipulation was removed. Also, candidates had the option to retake the test three times. Some students reported all scores to the University and some reported only the passing scores. Therefore, some scores represent multiple efforts of candidates to pass the exams. These multiple reportings may have lowered testscore averages and for the purposes of this report are included in the data. Also, some students may not have reported their highest score directly to the University as they may have sent scores only to the state for licensure purposes. Thus, it is possible that some of the highest scores may be missing from the included data ETS reports the following summary statistics for these three tests.

*Focus Group Interviews*

Focus group interviews were conducted with interns at the end of the block semester and at end of the student teaching semester to determine candidates' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of the block methods semester (fall), the student teaching semester (spring), and to gather suggestions for improvement of the Integrative Studies Major Program. The interviews were taped and data obtained through these focus group sessions were analyzed for themes and discrepancies. Participants were asked to sign a Consent Agreement Form, informed that the interview was being recorded by tape, and verbally assured that their identities would not be revealed in any reports related to the program evaluation. Five interns were interviewed at the end of the block semester for the purposes of this study. They met on the university campus and were interviewed by a university professor not directly involved with the program. At the end of the second semester, four candidates completing their student teaching were interviewed following the same procedure.

Given the stipulations, Praxis II score results indicate that the Integrative Studies Program effectively prepares teachers for a career in education. On test 011 candidates performed higher that the national median, on test 012 candidates performed below the national median, and on test 522 candidates performed at the national average.

Table 2
*Praxis II Summary Statistics*

| Test | Possible Score Range | Score Interval | No. of Examinees | Median | Average Performance Range | Standard Error of Measurement | Standard Error of Scoring |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 011 | 100–200 | 1 | 34,557 | 154 | 146–163 | 9 | 4.0 |
| 012 | 100–200 | 1 | 65,368 | 179 | 169–188 | 7.3 | 0 |
| 522 | 100–200 | 1 | 56,107 | 174 | 167–182 | 6.2 | 2.0 |

Table 3
*Praxis II Test Scores*

| Praxis Test Number | Semester | No. of Reported Scores | Passing Rate | University Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 011 | Fall, 2000 | 17 | 159 | 173.61 |
| 011 | Spring, 2001 | 8 | 159 | 176.50 |
| 011 | Fall, 2001 | 35 | 159 | 166.43 |
| 011 Overall | | 60 | | **172.18** |
| 012 | Fall, 2000 | 17 | 138 | 152.71 |
| 012 | Spring, 2001 | 7 | 138 | 148.29 |
| 012 | Fall, 2001 | 35 | 138 | 146.91 |
| 012 Overall | | 59 | | **149.30** |
| 522 | Fall, 2000 | 19 | 155 | 173.21 |
| 522 | Spring, 2001 | 5 | 155 | 184.80 |
| 522 | Fall, 2001 | 34 | 155 | 166.09 |
| 522 Overall | | 58 | | **174.70** |

*Note*. Fall 2000 candidates required to take Praxis II before student teaching
Spring 2002 candidates required to complete Praxis II by student teaching

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Based on the data of this study, participants believed that they were well prepared to begin a career in teaching. They predicated this confidence on their extensive experience in real classrooms working with real students; their relationships with peers, mentors, cooperating teachers and university professors; and, the rigors and requirements of the Integrative Studies Major Program. Although there were issues and problems that arose during this first year of implementation, none were significant detractors of the overall program concept and design.

*Program Modifications and Improvements*

The suggestions for program modification concerned (a) improved interaction between university and school personnel, (b) more direct

connections and follow-through between methods instruction, classroom experience, and student teaching placements, and (c) closer alignment to content knowledge expected to be taught, especially at early levels in reading and in upper levels of other content areas. These suggestions were used for planning and modification for the next cycle of the program.

There is obviously great need for strong leadership in the implementation of any new teacher preparation program in order to bring about improvements that will continue to build strong teachers for the future. In addition, schools selected for housing the program must have whole-school teacher commitment and high levels of professionalism in helping the young and inexperienced learn what they need to know to be successful teachers. One student expressed this concern by saying, "A struggling school can't help us. This program needs to be in strong schools where teachers are having success." She continued by saying, "I also learned from this program that I won't be happy teaching where teachers don't get along or they don't work together. I like working with a team and not every school has this spirit." Another student commented, "We were given a mission in this program—to change what teaching is. I think we want to do that, and we think we *can* do it, but we know, also, that we are not ready to be a 'leader' yet. We are going to need support in these first years to get there." These comments point to the importance of selecting schools where environments are supportive and conducive to collaboration. They also point to the increasing problem of recruiting and retaining teachers in schools where environments are not positive. Thus, ways of strengthening the mentoring aspect of the program should continue to be explored and developed not only in the final year of preparation for becoming a teacher, but also in the first years of developing into a teacher.

University professors must continue to examine what they are teaching in order to better align methods with content and to work collaboratively. They also must be committed to "following through" with students and giving them feedback on their performance in the classroom and not just on written assignments or portfolios. Coursework prior to the block semester needs to be continually examined for ways of creating closer alignment with what elementary and middle school teachers, as well as students, are expected to know and be able to do.

The Integrative Studies Program is one teacher preparation program that meets the criteria for developing highly qualified teachers. The teacher candidates in this program receive extensive classroom experience before beginning to teach and complete intensive coursework tied to actual classrooms, students, and practical application. Also, Praxis test scores appear to indicate that teacher candidates from this program are performing at or above expected scores. Forming strong liaisons and building shared commitment between the University and school sites, as well as adequately preparing the university professors, schools, and teachers for delivery of the program are challenging tasks that emerged from the discussion with the students as areas of priority for continued improvement of the program. The students' levels of enthusiasm for becoming teachers and their confidence levels in assuming their professional roles was clearly evident and indicates that there is much promise through the Integrative Studies Program for increased recruitment and retention of teachers into the teaching profession.

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