

Expanding Teacher Preparation Pathways for Paraprofessionals: A Recruiting Seminar Series

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The landscape of public schools is changing. Nationally, nearly one third of school age children are cultural minorities versus only 16% of the teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Projections for the next twenty years estimate dramatic changes in national demographics with 61% of the population increases occurring among members of the Hispanic and Asian communities (Hodgkinson, 2002).

In response to changing demographics, teacher education programs have been limited in their ability to produce substantial numbers of teachers from racial, ethnic, and language minority groups (Clewel & Villegas, 1998; Hodgkinson, 2002; Kane & Orsini, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Su, 1997). Schools in general and urban schools in particular, suffer from a shortage of minority teachers in their teaching force. On a national level, the number of minority teachers is diminishing, while the number of minority students continues to grow (Hodgkinson, 2002; Stanford, 1999).

Despite general agreement that increased numbers

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of minority teachers would be beneficial, traditional teacher preparation programs have had difficulties attracting applicants, assisting them through programs, and launching them into successful educational careers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This problem is particularly acute in one metropolitan area of a western state. This major urban region has undergone a rapid and dramatic shift in its demographics with an increase of 117% in minorities between 1990-2000 (Perlich, 2002). Thus, in those years, one in three new residents was a minority person and the Hispanic population more than doubled. The primary urban school district reported that 53% of its students were from non-majority populations; however only 3% of its educators were from non-majority populations (2007 district census data). Barriers, specifically language barriers, academic coursework, and the perception that the university is inaccessible to minorities, have limited a local research university in attracting teacher candidates from these populations.

Calls for increased numbers of minority teachers have come from a variety of sources and been justified in a number of ways. Educators in general (Haberman, 1996), minority educators (Banks, 1993; Gay, 2002; Hollins, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and teacher educators (Grant, 1994), have all recommended increasing the number of minority teachers in schools. Arguments for increasing the number of minority teachers include: (a) serving as role models for minority students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Clewell & Villegas, 1998; Villegas, 1997), (b) providing more culturally relevant instruction (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995), (c) bridging differences between minority students' homes and cultures and schools (Genzok & Baca, 1998; Morris, 2004), and (d) in general, providing alternate perspectives on appropriate and effective practices for all students (Banks, 1993).

In response to the need for diversifying the teaching force, districts are increasingly tapping into an existing community of educators. In 2004 there were approximately 1.3 million paraprofessionals in public schools. Of that group, 75% were employed in elementary schools where over half of the paraprofessionals worked with children receiving special education services (United States Bureau of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2007). Further, within many communities across the United States, the number of paraprofessionals who are non native English speakers far exceeds native English speakers. In many major urban and rural communities, 60-75% of paraprofessionals are from racial and language minority groups.

Paraprofessionals represent a growing segment of district employees seeking professional licensure. National preparation programs through the American Federation of Teachers, national testing programs, and state initiated portfolio programs offer a variety of options for meeting the stipulations set under NCLB legislation and for attracting paraprofessionals into the teaching profession (Burbank, 2008; AACTE, 2004; Keller, 2004).

The federal government defines paraprofessionals as any person who works under the direct supervision of a classroom teacher in an early childhood, elemen-

tary, or secondary school. Paraprofessionals may work in traditional classrooms or with language education teachers, special educators, or in immigrant education programs (NCLB, 2001). Clearly the work of paraprofessionals is becoming more technical, requiring increased training and evaluation. Now more than ever, those employing paraprofessionals are in need of professional development resources that are current and reflect the changing work responsibilities of paraprofessionals and the communities in which they work.

Several studies have sought ways of strategically recruiting minority paraprofessionals into the teaching profession (Bennett, 2002; Dandy, 1998; Flynn, 2001; Genzok & Baca, 1998; Littleton, 1998). However, the majority of studies on paraprofessionals fail to address the ways in which collaborative linkages between institutions of higher education and local school districts respond to the unique needs of individuals within the paraprofessional community. Additionally, past studies fail to examine the relationships between immigrant paraprofessionals and the development of a pre-teacher recruiting curriculum that extends beyond test preparation and skills training. This project examined the collaborative efforts of stakeholders involved in developing an innovative seminar series for recruiting paraprofessionals into the teaching profession. Participants in the study completed a year-long preservice Introduction to Teaching course through a western university.

One other issue promoted this project and research. Currently a state-sponsored alternative licensure program has been implemented; however, it has failed to successfully launch individuals, especially minorities, into teaching. Nationally, Darling-Hammond showed that of those students who enter from a “short-term alternative” program, only 34% remain in classrooms after three years, while 84% of those with a comprehensive, integrated teacher preparation program remain in classrooms after the same time period (2003, p. 10). We sought an opportunity to explore how to support paraprofessionals in accessing traditional approaches to teacher education.

The purpose of this project was to investigate the effectiveness of a professional development experience designed to increase the recruitment of paraprofessionals as a pool of prospective teachers. This collaborative project examined the curriculum and assignments used as part of a recruiting seminar series. The perspectives of non-native and native English speakers employed as paraprofessionals in an urban school district are discussed. The goal was to examine how a recruiting curriculum meets the needs of a diverse group of paraprofessionals.

Research Methods

This is a qualitative study that considers the questions surrounding participants’ professional development experiences and examines how the experiences of a group of paraprofessionals influenced their participation in a teacher recruiting opportunity. The following research questions guided this study:

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1. What aspects of the seminar curriculum and pedagogical approaches resonate most powerfully with paraprofessionals?
2. What benefits do the paraprofessionals feel they gained by participating in a recruiting seminar?

A descriptive case study chronicles the experiences of a cohort of paraprofessionals through a year-long professional development seminar series. Participants included 10 individuals employed as K-12 paraprofessionals in an urban school district who were both native and non-native English speakers. The project was part of a larger project that investigated the benefits of collaboration as a forum for Community-Based Research (CBR) (Maurrassee, 2001; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

Community-Based Research is a method of examining practices that link university and college campuses with the wider local community. CBR partners work collaboratively to identify issues of study, determine methods for gathering and reviewing data, and establish plans for guiding future actions within their communities (Strand, et al, 2003). The roots of CBR are embedded within campus-community partnerships. These university-neighborhood partnerships work collectively to meet common goals (Campbell, 1999).

Influenced by the theoretical foundations of CBR (Strand, et al., 2003), project facilitators met to identify mechanisms for strengthening the linkages between a teacher preparation program and a school district's need to increase the diversity of its teaching force. Utilizing CBR, this district university partnership established the first steps to rethink practices for recruiting a diverse population of prospective teachers. A commitment to quality education, coupled with systematic movements toward improvement, characterize what Fullan (2000) describes as *reculturing*—a process in which community members routinely examine practices within schools that change practices as well as the culture within their professional communities.

Individual participants in the project were identified based upon their interest in earning a teaching license and their completion of at least an Associate's degree. The teacher licensure program affiliated with this project provides an undergraduate teacher licensure program in elementary and secondary education with master's degree programs in early childhood and secondary education. Students across programs complete a series of core courses in general education, special education, educational psychology, and educational foundations.

Capitalizing on relationships established from previous collaborative efforts, an associate superintendent and teacher educator developed a plan for better serving the district's growing population of immigrant students by increasing the number of teachers of color to more accurately reflect the composition of the district's demographic make up. Our project reflects first steps in changing opportunities for accessing higher education in ways that are relevant and culturally responsive. All names and locations are listed as pseudonyms.

Methodological Framework and Participants

An initial personal history survey was created and distributed to 169 paraprofessionals in the district. The results were examined using simple descriptive statistics. Fifty-seven percent of the 169 individuals who responded, reported possessing a bachelor's degree with another 40% holding an Associate's degree and 3% a high school diploma. Of those responding, 65% identified an interest in earning a teaching license. Sixty-six percent reported a preference for attending a two or four year institution of higher education, versus alternative certification, and 68% reported financial aid to be a critical program component.

Based upon feedback from the personal history survey, 25 paraprofessionals holding a post-secondary degree, who were both native and non-native English speakers were invited to participate in a series of professional development seminars. Like many paraprofessionals, the participants in this study had limited incomes requiring them to work multiple jobs in order to meet family financial obligations. Attendance at the monthly meetings was a challenge at best for those holding down more than one job. Work and personal schedules reduced the initial pool of 25 participants to 10 who participated in the year-long project. Seven of the participants were native Spanish speakers, one was a native Romanian speaker, and two participants were native English speakers.

The educational backgrounds of participants included associates degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees. These successful graduates of higher education in their home countries encountered difficulties verifying credentials when applying to institutions of higher education in the United States. Eight of the 10 participants hoped that their experiences in this project would validate their international experiences and credentials (See Table I)

Table I
Study Participants

Name	Country of Origin	Native Language	Degree from Home Country	U.S. Education	Years in U.S.	Age
Angela	U.S.	Spanish	BA	BA	45	45
Becky	U.S.	English	BA	BA	35	35
Donna	Mexico	Spanish	BS		3	28
Juan	Mexico	Spanish		BS	7	33
Leticia	Mexico	Spanish	MA/MA		8	55
Lorna	Mexico	Spanish	AA	Dist. Workshops	10	50
Maria	Bosnia	Bosnian/German	BA		6	47
Sonia	Columbia	Spanish	MA		4	34
Tina	U.S.	U.S.		AA	35	35
Anna	Mexico	Spanish	AA	Dist. Workshops	4	29

Seminar and Curriculum Details

Combined funding from an urban school district, College of Education, and Community-Based Research grant provided 10 paraprofessionals with a year-long professional development seminar including paid tuition for the year-long three credit class, portfolio materials, books and reference materials, and refreshments during each class period. Funds also covered test registration fees for those applying to a teacher licensure program. Seminar meetings were held monthly over the course of an academic year. A meeting site at a district high school provided participants with access to a class location near their schools of employment.

The seminar curriculum for Introduction to Teaching included the study of legal, historical, and philosophical underpinnings of teacher education in the United States; an introduction to teacher licensure; strategies for navigating policies and procedures in higher education; and state licensure requirements. Class readings included standard themes affiliated with an introduction to teaching course including the history and structure of American schools, traditional curriculum and instruction in American schools, an introduction to school law, and the logistics of applying to teacher education programs. These more standard topics were provided as general overviews. Based upon initial survey data and conversations with class members, additional readings included a specific focus on learner diversity including immigrant's perspectives on American schools (Budhos, 1999); teaching in urban schools using Haberman's (1996) text *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* and selected readings affiliated with social class and schooling (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995), power and pedagogy (Delpit, 1988), effective schools research (Levine & Lezotte, 1995), bilingual education (Rothstein, 1998), and Obgu's (1995) writings on cultural diversity and learning.

The curriculum included standard topics in an introduction to teaching class as well as topics identified by participants as significant. Class activities included discussion groups; journal responses to course readings; in-class presentations on issues from the media, school boards, and classrooms and schools; book groups; and portfolio development. Each participant was also required, under the direction of a classroom teacher, to teach two micro-lessons where they worked with their classroom teacher to develop a lesson plan. The lessons were video taped and reflections written. Classroom teachers provided written feedback on the lessons using district evaluation criteria that had been reviewed as part of the seminar class. Additional classroom activities included interviews with school stakeholders such as principals. The final written assignment asked participants to reflect upon their decision to become a teacher. All participants completed an exit interview where they shared their portfolios and final reflections.

During the year-long program the following data sources were collected: questionnaires (i.e., open-ended intake, mid-term and exit surveys); journal entries, book reactions, portfolio artifacts (e.g., lesson plans; school culture study assignments including interviews with teachers and administrators), and exit interviews with each project participant.

Data from surveys, interviews, and course assignments were analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were coded according to categories that emerged from within the data, as themes and patterns in the data became evident. These themes and patterns were continually rechecked against the data for confirming and disconfirming evidence throughout the process. Perspectives were checked and rechecked across data sources and participants. Themes were collapsed as subcategories emerged and ultimately we determined our three main overarching themes for key issues in the data and experiences of seminar participants.

Findings

Three themes are identified that help to answer the research questions and are described in detail below: (a) paraprofessionals had clear goals for what they wanted to learn to support their work in schools; (b) book club activities were identified as the most helpful pedagogical approach for learning during the seminar; (c) the voices of immigrant paraprofessionals highlighted their life stories; (d) the benefits of immigrants' voices impacted the class experiences of native English speakers. Throughout the following sections, the experiences and beliefs of Leticia are highlighted in detail as a focal participant. Her experiences, and those of others are used to help illuminate the meaning of our findings.

Finding One

Perspectives of paraprofessionals on seminar content and their goals for development as prospective teachers. Through an initial survey and follow up interviews, paraprofessionals provided considerable detail when asked to describe what they hoped to learn and what they learned as students in the recruiting seminar. Paraprofessionals explicitly requested instruction for K-12 teachers of mathematics, reading, and science pedagogy. They asked for information in content area instruction because of the pressures their schools were experiencing under No Child Left Behind and the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals of their schools. Study participants later reported that the AYP pressures were particularly challenging for the English Language Learners (ELLs) in their schools (in-class discussion comments).

Paraprofessionals also expressed the need for greater knowledge of the day-to-day workings of classrooms, resources for educators, and knowledge of how to interact with parents and other professionals within school communities (intake survey). Paraprofessionals requested information to help them understand learner diversity, including Spanish speakers and students with disabilities.

As a group, participants expressed interest in learning more about the United States educational system including legal issues, governance structures, and instruction for a diverse student body. Their considerable experience working in classrooms

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with immigrant students accentuated their awareness of a need for coursework that addressed the range of learners' needs in their classrooms.

Our findings indicate that while the intake surveys cited a need for greater knowledge of technical skills related to reading and mathematics pedagogy, it was crucial for the course instructor to supplement the more traditional Introduction to Teaching course with a curriculum and assignments that reflected the unique qualities of this group of prospective teachers. Specifically, data from their mid-terms and exit interviews illustrated that these paraprofessionals learned of the value of curriculum and pedagogy in public schools. Of equal significance was the impact of specific course readings that linked general education themes to urban schools and immigrant perspectives. Course readings and class discussions that provided insights into the worlds of students and families resonated with class members. For example, seminar curriculum on the uses and potential drawbacks of standardized assessment took on new meaning when participants were able to look at the implications of testing for immigrants and refugees facing NCLB testing requirements. These newfound understandings are illustrated in Leticia's impressions.

Even though I now feel more confident that I can become a very good teacher based upon what I have learned about public education (coupled with my being a life-long learner), I now think more than ever that the low priority the public school system actually places upon meeting the needs of the low income, minority, and immigrant students.... (Leticia, final portfolio reflection).

Finding Two

Uses of book club as a pedagogical and curricular approach. Following their experiences in the year-long seminar series, participants were asked to evaluate specific aspects of the pedagogy and curriculum that were strengths as well as limitations. When asked if the course had met their needs, feedback through reflection papers indicated that the course work increased the depth at which participants examined educational issues. For example, paraprofessionals reported that the book club structure and reading themes provided an effective introduction to education, as well as a forum for professional discussions of broader issues. For Tina, Haberman's book provided a snapshot for what she described as "pockets of star teachers" within her school. In alignment with her initial goals to learn more about curriculum and pedagogy in her work with students with special needs, Tina noted that the book club and course readings helped her to see connections between school conditions and success for children (in-class discussions and book club critique). Similar to the experiences of Leticia, course readings and assignments made evident for Tina, the impact of socio-political factors on the manner which curriculum and pedagogy play out in schools. Tina noted,

My idealism expressed by Haberman, is also mixed with reality of the environment...Like Haberman I believe each student is an individual aspiring to show

what she/he can achieve. I hope that I can be a spark to learning, even if it is only for one student (Tina, book critique).

When asked to evaluate specific course content, class members overwhelmingly cited positively works related to the needs of English Language Learners and the “real work” of teachers. All paraprofessionals mentioned a lack of time as a major obstacle to greater investigations of ideas and in-depth dialogue.

Exit interviews revealed that all participants reacted positively to their participation in book study groups citing the following advantages: opportunities to think about current practices, a vehicle for increasing professional dialogue, and an opportunity to discuss educational issues in a non-threatening context. All paraprofessionals found the book discussions helpful in their explorations of alternate perspectives and interpretations of events similar to their own classrooms and schools. As one middle school paraprofessional noted,

Our readings about the various theories of education and learning, the challenges posed by diverse learners, and the central role played by the curriculum, have interested me the most. Because I work with an extremely diverse, newly arrived immigrant student population, creative adaptation and integration of the core curriculum is exactly what’s needed.

The book club and reading discussions brought the oftentimes generic conversations of diversity and urban schools to life. Reading themes provided anchors to which paraprofessionals linked their own classroom and life stories.

Finding Three

Unique perspective of immigrant paraprofessionals. Unlike many who enter teacher education programs, the paraprofessionals in this project brought unique insights into the barriers and limitations faced by many K-12 students. Participants reported that specific seminar assignments and reading topics allowed participants to showcase their histories and viewpoints as reflected most poignantly in the story of Leticia. For immigrants such as Leticia, the written assignments (e.g., journal entries, lesson plans) helped her apply her experiences as an ELL to adaptations in curriculum and instruction for the students in her classroom. The newfound knowledge from their seminar classes provided opportunities to evaluate policy and practice for immigrant students in her school.

Leticia’s story speaks well to the complexity of the lives of immigrants, hoping to become educators. In her final reflection and analysis paper she speaks to the layered life she brings to public education. Leticia commented that as a group, the paraprofessional community must learn to navigate through more than the traditional red-tape bureaucracy faced by those entering teacher education programs. She noted:

I see the large number of highly educated recent immigrants who were skilled and respected professionals in the homelands, but here find themselves relegated

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to menial jobs because of the difficulties they encounter in obtaining licenses... eventually I was able to find a way to begin to return to some sort of social work through churches, non-profits, and now public schools. But, still, I lack professional certification of any sort in this country despite two master's degrees. I have yet to be recognized in any meaningful way. (Leticia, final reflection)

On an individual level, participants shared powerful stories regarding the impact of the course curriculum on their perspectives on education and diversity. Course readings on the experiences of immigrant children in the United States school system resonated deeply. For Angela, a 45 year old female, the fear, struggles, and triumphs of students in Marina Budhos' (1999) text *Remix: Conversations with immigrant teenagers* paralleled her life as she encountered the public school system as a paraprofessional. Text themes that highlighted the experiences of ELLs were particularly poignant and resonated with Leticia:

The course readings helped me to appreciate that my particular racial, cultural, and education background, as an immigrant, can prove to be of great value in the increasingly diverse public schools of the United States.

After reading Lisa Delpit's 1988 *Harvard Educational Review* article, "The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children," Sonia tearfully reported, "You don't understand what an impact this article has had on me. I can't believe there are stories like mine in these books." She went on, "These are the stories of our children in the classroom today." "Maybe *I can* become a teacher." The power of the curriculum for these paraprofessionals provided an understanding of the technical dimensions of classrooms and schools as well as stories that resonated and validated their experiences as paraprofessionals.

During their exit portfolio interviews the life-stories of paraprofessionals were captured in the artifacts within their documents that reflected their need for validation in their lives in the United States. During each portfolio meeting, recent immigrants and non-native English speakers included a portfolio section often filled with dozens of certificates from district, community, state, and sometimes national organizations. Documentation illustrated their participation and recognition in a number of training programs, outreach organizations, volunteer experiences, and work within schools and the community. These *badges of merit* were one way of validating to the US education community that they had something to offer a system that fails to recognize their accomplishments in more tangible ways. As Leticia pessimistically commented in reference to the No Child Left Behind standards for highly qualified paraprofessionals, "So...am I now highly qualified under No Child Left Behind?" She went on to say,

Though I was never a licensed professional in the country of my birth, I obtained two advanced degrees from a university that I believe to be as good an institution of higher learning as almost any to be found elsewhere in the world... Yet, after my arrival in this country... I have not been recognized in any meaningful way for my experiences and credentials until our course.

For Donna, Leticia, and Maria, the process of validating their credentials and experiences as immigrants to the US has been difficult at best. Laws and policies following 9/11 have made the validation of immigration status and transcripts review even more rigorous than in previous years. A seminar guest speaker who reviews transcripts for international students at Western University shared how the process for transcript reviews following 9/11 requires more stringent procedures for reviews, greater cost, and increased time spent completing reviews. These policy changes further complicate access to higher education and credentialing for immigrants.

The recruiting seminar provided a forum to examine the issues facing contemporary immigrant paraprofessionals, opportunities for micro-teaching, and a cohort of peers with whom to interact professionally. The seminar course work also revealed discontinuities in the professional experiences of paraprofessionals. For each of the immigrant paraprofessionals, their current positions paled in comparison to the positions held in their home countries. As former teachers, social workers, and counselors, there was often a sense of lost identity in their current positions as paraprofessionals in United States schools.

Finding Four

Benefits of immigrants' voices for native English speakers. For native English speakers, the insights of their immigrant peers brought course readings to life in substantive ways. As Tina reported, "Many students in my high school classes are immigrants too." She went on, "I never thought of their stories on a personal level until we talked about the life stories of the people in our readings and those in our seminar class." For Tina, the connections her immigrant peers made to seminar readings became "real" in ways she had not considered before. Tina furthered her comments,

I guess I have a lot to learn about my immigrant students...Learning about the experiences of the people in our class has made me realize how much experience they have. I've never thought about all that the immigrants bring to our school before now (final reflection).

The seminars' curriculum provided paraprofessionals with the necessary "insider information" to better address the inequities experienced by many of the immigrant students in their classrooms. Two paraprofessionals working with Latinos(as) expressed frustrations in their inability to respond, substantively, to students needing help with legal and logistical issues in their education. Readings and interviews with administrators that delineated governance structures and hierarchy of the United States school system illuminated potential pathways for problem solving and change. While unaware of the strata often associated with decision making common in educational institutions, paraprofessionals learned of viable access points for advocacy for themselves and their students. In-depth discussions related to legal issues for students with disabilities and students learning English provided

paraprofessionals with information on the rights of students and families. A study of the organizational structures of American schools and the role decision-making bodies in public schools provided resources on issues of advocacy and support. Not only was the curriculum a topic of study for these paraprofessionals, it was a way of life.

Implications

Benefits of Collaboration

In their text on Community-Based Research, Strand, et al. (2003) discuss the components of truly collaborative efforts. Within these partnerships stakeholders work jointly to identify common issues worthy of investigation, with the goal of reaching greater social justice and institutional reform for those within a community. The positive impact of grassroots movements in teacher education has been documented by previous research (Burbank, Bertagnole, Carl, Dynak, Longhurst, & Powell, 2005; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003). Through the collaborative efforts of this project, stakeholders established opportunities for goal setting, shared resources including funding and translation services, and developed a systematic plan for evaluating the success and limitations of the project.

Because of the past professional and institutional relationships between project stakeholders, safety, a level of trust, and risk taking were possible. For example, while both parties agreed to participate in the project, neither party held a hidden agenda regarding the direction the project might take. This trust and willingness to work collaboratively met three collective goals: (1) the development of a seminar series designed to recruit prospective teachers; (2) a professional development opportunity designed to meet the “highly qualified” standards for paraprofessionals under No Child Left Behind; and (3) a curriculum created in response to the needs of paraprofessionals working in the field of education. Lunch meetings, phone conversations, and e-mail correspondence were the platforms for ongoing discussions and project refinements. The characteristics of this partnership highlight the elements of effective CBR when participants are willing to share and modify goals, power, and the capacities of their organizations (Strand et al., 2003).

The project is limited in the degree to which it is truly collaborative. While the planning and evaluation components of the project were mutually agreed upon, the implementation of the project was highly influenced by the rules and regulations of higher education. For example, a course-based format that extended across an academic year was chosen due to its limited impact on the teaching load and job responsibilities of the university project facilitator who taught the course and ran the project. Grant funds only allowed for paraprofessional support. While the seminar format proved useful in that paraprofessionals were able to meet monthly over the course of time, more frequent meeting may have provided greater continuity. At times, the span of time between meetings caused lags in discussions and repetition

in course content as reviews of previous meetings took place. One must ask whether a pilot-project designed to recruit non traditional teachers is given the status that would allow for the support necessary for success.

A strength of the pilot nature of the project was the freedom provided to adapt the curriculum as necessary. When it became apparent to project leaders that it was necessary to provide immigrant paraprofessionals with information on topics such as transcript translations and language support, the project co-facilitators met or corresponded monthly to discuss curriculum adaptations. As the project evolved, the curriculum extended beyond formulaic exposure to application procedures, credentialing criteria, and standard levels of support and mentoring.

Administrative connections from both project facilitators allowed for easy access to contacts within the state, district, and university communities. These “insider” connections helped to identify: access to resources, information on procedural clearance, and formal review procedures for participants seeking credential reviews (e.g., transcript reviews) and admissions. The modifications in the curriculum coupled with support by project leaders allowed for an experience that was customized for the participants in this project.

Implementing Innovative Programs in Teacher Education

The collaborative efforts of this project reflect the importance of linking the contributions of stakeholders in ways that respond to the need for increasingly diverse pool of prospective teachers. The work of two stakeholders illuminated the pathways to a credentialing programs for those who may not typically know the strategies for accessing teacher education programs. The project has been relatively successful in its examination of routes to licensure for a diverse population of prospective teachers through a customized curriculum.

As a result of their experiences in the recruiting course, feedback from participants is promising. In addition to the importance of providing participants with an opportunity to develop professionally, teacher education programs must invest the time for one-on-one mentoring and guidance. With project facilitator support, one member of the group has since received an initial teaching credential through contacts orchestrated through the project facilitators and the State Office of Education. Three members of the pilot group applied to the College of Education’s graduate licensure programs in elementary and secondary education and recently completed the initial exams required for entry into the licensure programs.

As a group, the paraprofessionals in this project were given platforms and a “voice” that did not exist before the project. A school-based mentor to three of the paraprofessionals recently commented, “Your students are abuzz with the discussions from your class... They are asking questions about policy and curriculum and they’re worrying about the next lessons they plan to teach.” She went on to say, “They are alive with the content from you class and it’s translating to their work with students!”

Next Steps

This project began with the goal of diversifying the teaching profession through the collaborative efforts of a school district and university. Our study describes the aspects of the seminar curriculum designed to meet the needs and interests of a group of contemporary paraprofessionals and the experience of participants. The varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the paraprofessional community are significant. Initial survey data and feedback from those interested in the paraprofessional seminar directed the content of seminar curriculum. Class discussions and assignments gave credibility to dilemmas faced by immigrants trying to validate their credentials. The project illuminated the need for recruiting programs for paraprofessionals that extend beyond the important, though narrow focus on applications and general suggestions for navigating the logistics within institutions of higher education.

The goal of recruiting students of color into teacher education is a first step in the process of attracting and retaining more minority teachers. In many major rural and urban communities 60-75% of paraprofessionals are from racial and language minority groups (National Resources Center for Paraprofessionals, 2005; United States Department of Education, 1999). Previous research on recruiting programs for paraprofessionals has delineated many of the components necessary for accessing higher education including the critical need for financial, social, and academic skill support, strategies for accessing higher education, school-based experiences, and community partnerships (Bennett, 2002; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Recruiting New Teachers Inc, 2003; Steeley, 2003). Equally critical is a recruitment curriculum that responds to the diverse needs of today's diverse paraprofessional community.

In addition to systematic recruiting, institutions of higher education must establish formalized linkages with school districts that move beyond the often times superficial development of inclusive mission statements and periodic recruiting fairs. School districts and institutions of higher education must work collaboratively to establish environments that promote minority teacher retention including pay incentives, professional development opportunities, and mentoring that is continuous and reciprocal (Ingersoll, 2003). If the goal of collaboration between school districts and institutions of higher education is to increase the number of teachers of color from within their communities, commitment and systematic plans for recruiting, educating, and mentoring must be created.

This project began with the goal of investigating ways of increasing the diversity of the teaching force in a community experiencing a rapid demographic shift in its population. The collaborative efforts between an institution of higher education and an urban school district provided quick access to a data bank of professional histories with potential candidates for a teacher education program. The development, translation, and distribution of surveys provided an overview of the needs and interests of a community of prospective teachers. Initial interest survey responses and data gathered during introductory meetings directed the scope and sequence of the course

curriculum. Assistance with writing, accessing resources, and gaining greater clarity on issues in education were benefits of the collaborative sharing of resources.

Because minority teachers bring unique experiences to teacher education programs, the preparation experiences of these individuals must reflect these differences (Burbank et al., 2005; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003; Gay, 2002). That is, there is considerable variation in the personal beliefs of minority teacher candidates regarding curriculum, instruction, and views of students (Burbank, 2003) This finding is intuitively sensible to anyone who has observed in classrooms or worked in teacher education however, we must also create learning experiences that promote cultural congruence between minority teachers, and prospective teachers, and the students in their classrooms (Foster, 1995). Specialized curricula, school-based experiences, and community partnerships must also be designed (RNT, 2003). However, what is less evident is a discussion of the ways in which the curriculum of recruiting programs can illuminate both the pathways to licensure programs in ways that resonate with the experiences, cultures, and long-term goals of paraprofessionals seeking teaching credentials.

Our study illustrated that while the procedural dimensions of a recruiting curriculum are important, the curriculum must extend beyond the administrative tasks of applications and admissions. A recruiting curriculum must also include examinations of historical and present educational practices that limit access to the teaching profession for traditionally underrepresented groups. A curriculum that unearths systemic barriers within educational institutions not only illustrates for prospective teachers the historical and present-day practices that limit access, but heightens an awareness and sensitivity to exclusionary practices for those responsible for designing and overseeing teacher recruiting efforts.

As noted by one paraprofessional who is a bilingual Mexican American single parent, a twenty year old GPA may limit her access to a graduate teacher education program. A Bachelor's degree from a western university, certificates in criminal justice, and numerous commendations do not supersede existing criteria for admissions to a teacher licensure program. Further, current licensing and credentialing requirements under NCLB have made access even more complex. Angela noted,

With the stipulations of No Child Left Behind and other accountability movements, it becomes more difficult for people of color to actually enter a system [as educators] that did not prepare them for higher education or provide the skills to pass tests. It is critical that the teacher education classes provide what we need to meet these criteria in explicit ways. In addition to meeting the standards for accountability you [teacher educators] must also recognize the ways in which we serve as vital links for all students because of what we bring to the table.

A curriculum for paraprofessionals is therefore twofold. Clearly, the skills necessary for credentialing and accessing higher education are essential. Additionally, we must ensure a curriculum that legitimizes the backgrounds of the

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paraprofessionals, more than many others, whose lives so powerfully parallel the lives and experiences of their 21st century, K-12 students.

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