

The Development of Preservice Teaching Competencies

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Abstract: *Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) face challenges in connecting theory and practice to develop competent preservice teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of preservice teachers within a developing university-school district partnership. We asked the following questions: (1) How do preservice teachers describe challenges and sources of support during a yearlong teaching residency? (2) How do preservice teachers describe their development in various competencies during their residency year? (3) How do preservice teachers perceive the coherence of the university-school district partnership? We collected data through focus groups occurring throughout the year. Our results show the importance of the sources of support from both the mentor teacher and the university supervisor and maintaining relationships between placement schools and the university to increase program coherence. However, a stronger emphasis is needed on assessment and classroom management.*

Key Words: University-School District Partnership, Preservice Teachers, Early-Career Teachers, Teacher Education Programs, Preservice Teaching Competencies

Teacher education programs (TEPs) aim to prepare competent teachers, ready to enter and face the typical challenge of beginning teachers. However, many TEPs struggle to connect theory and practice (Lew & Nelson, 2016), leaving beginning teachers less effective than more experienced teachers (Clotfelter et al., 2010; Hanushek, 2004). Being underprepared as a beginning teacher affects their self-efficacy, confidence and preparedness to implement effective teaching strategies (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), it also affects student achievement during their first and second years of teaching (Boyd et al., 2009). Research suggests beginning teachers tend to struggle with classroom management, assessment, and formulating objectives (Buck et al., 2010; Daniels & Poth, 2017; Gilles et al., 2013; Gorneau, 2014; Lew & Nelson, 2016; Reed, 2012).

The structure of TEPs matter. Programs that focus on the “practices of teaching” are associated with an increase in student achievement outcomes equivalent to the effect of a year of experience in teaching (Boyd et al., 2009). These practices of teaching include reviewing curriculum, analyzing math work, or planning a guided reading lesson, completing a capstone project, and other activities that deepen content knowledge (Boyd et al., 2009). Coherence between university and school-based settings is another structure that influences the preparedness of preservice teachers (Grossman et al., 2008). Programs with strong coherence build a shared understanding of teaching and learning and incorporate coursework and student teaching experiences that support these shared goals. Additional factors that reflect theory-practice

coherence include: a strong relationship between faculty who observe student teachers and faculty who teach coursework and a long-term tenure of cooperating teachers (Grossman et al., 2008).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of preservice teachers within a developing university-school district partnership. Our three research questions were: (1) How do preservice teachers describe challenges and sources of support during a yearlong teaching residency? (2) How do preservice teachers describe their development in various competencies during their residency year? (3) How do preservice teachers perceive the coherence of the university-school district partnership?

METHOD

The university teacher education program in this study is a one-year graduate-level program in which students complete coursework and fieldwork concurrently throughout the year. Preservice teachers were paired with an experienced mentor teacher and coached and evaluated by a university supervisor. Throughout the academic year, our research team hosted three focus groups with preservice teachers from different grade levels and content areas. The focus groups were held in the beginning of the year (fall), mid-year (winter), and near the end of the year (spring). A total of eight participants were present in the focus groups, including four elementary teachers and four secondary teachers. Seven of the participants were female and one was male. The district in which the participants were completing their student teaching is an urban district in a large city in the Western United States. Student demographics in placement schools ranged from 80% to 97% free and reduced lunch and between 87% and 99% minority populations.

Data analysis. We analyzed preservice teachers' descriptions of their preparedness including their descriptions of their own efficacy and sources of support. Each focus group recording was transcribed individually for analysis and coding was completed by all three members of the research team. Coding was completed by looking at significant statements and by looking for agreement or disagreement within the data. Statements were then grouped into themes (Creswell, 2013).

Results

The results of our focus groups show that both mentor teachers and university supervisors were important to developing a sense of self-efficacy in key teaching competencies. The themes that emerged from the focus groups included the specific sources of support for preservice teachers, the development of certain teaching competencies over time, and perceived coherence of the program.

Theme #1: sources of support. The university supervisor, mentor teacher, and placement school were seen as important sources of support and important to developing the self-efficacy of participants. In particular, the university supervisor was key for emotional support by validating feelings, highlighting the positives from observations, and giving a few things to work on without giving too many suggestions. Additionally, being seen as a co-teacher instead of a preservice teacher in the classroom helped participants feel welcome and feel like they had authority in the classroom. The relationship that preservice teachers developed with their mentor teachers also supported the development of teacher competencies. For example, several of the participants stated that they learned how to actively engage students, pace their lessons appropriately, differentiate instruction, and create engaging lessons through the modeling of their mentor teachers.

Theme #2: teaching competency development. Participants expressed varying levels of confidence throughout their student teaching experience with various teaching competencies. For example, in the fall, preservice teachers discussed their desire to have more instruction on classroom management. Although preservice teachers grew confidence in classroom management throughout the year, they felt that they did not have many opportunities to practice different strategies in their mentor teachers' classroom. Participants also reported growth with actively engaging students in learning and having clear and high expectations for students using instructional strategies and pacing as a strength. For many participants, their mentor teachers were the primary support for building that skill throughout the year. In each of the focus groups, preservice teacher participants still felt apprehensive in some areas of teaching: differentiation, academic conversations, and creating engaging lessons as first year teachers.

Theme #3: perceived coherence of the program. The final research question investigated the perceived coherence of the university-school district partnership. At the beginning of the year, there was a larger gap between the theory participants were learning in their coursework and the application into the classroom. Many of the participants felt they did not have an opportunity to apply what they were learning in their university classes into their student teaching yet. Another disconnect that participants expressed between the university and the school district was the difference in the evaluation tool that the university used and the evaluation tool from the school district. Most participants were familiar with the evaluation tool the district was using from their interactions with their mentor teacher and other faculty at their placement school. Some participants discussed the school district evaluation system more in depth with their mentor teachers. Finally, the relationship between the mentor teacher and the university program had a bigger impact on the perceived coherence of the program. When mentor teachers had a prior relationship with the university, they felt more supported and found more connections between the university courses and their student teaching placement.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our study was to explore the experiences of preservice teachers within a developing university-school district partnership. Our three research questions asked about the sources of support during the program, the development of competencies, and how they perceive the coherence of the university-school district partnership. This study provides some insight on how preservice teachers develop teaching competencies over time and how an intentional university-school district partnership can support their development and self-efficacy.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Our first research question investigated the sources of support for preservice teachers in the university-school district partnership. Preservice teachers expressed greater self-efficacy when they felt included in the school. This is consistent with previous findings that mentor teachers and placement schools play an important role in ensuring that preservice teachers are included as a part of the staff, that they discuss and scaffold practice, and play a role of instructional coach (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Fayne, 2007; Hall et al., 2008). The university supervisor also played an important role in bridging the gap between coursework and student teaching. Prior studies highlight the role of the university supervisor in supporting the transition from formal knowledge to practical knowledge and putting their learning into action (Range et al., 2013). Our participants confirmed that the university supervisor played an important role in breaking down specific teaching skills

and competencies. Additionally, the university supervisor played an important role in bridging the gap between coursework and fieldwork by making their mentor teacher's practices more explicit.

DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING COMPETENCIES

Our second question investigated preservice teachers' development of teaching competencies within the university-school district partnership. Both mentor teachers and university supervisors played a significant role in the growth and development of teaching skills including pacing lessons, differentiation, and creating engaging activities. Participants in our study had the most confidence and self-efficacy in areas related to instructional strategies and pacing. Another area of growth in confidence and self-efficacy was in classroom management; however, participants wanted more opportunities to practice. Assessment was not often discussed in the focus groups. Nolan and colleagues (2011) found that bridging the worlds of student teaching and the university classroom led to a stronger development of assessment skills.

PROGRAM COHERENCE

Our final research question investigated program coherence in the university-school district partnership. Previous research stressed the importance of the coherence between fieldwork and coursework (Boyd et al., 2009; Grossman et al., 2008) and the importance of being in a real classroom setting for preservice teacher preparation (Brown et al., 2015). Our findings support these prior studies. Participants appreciated the full year of student teaching and the connections that they were able to make between their student teaching placement and their university classes. However, those connections were stronger when placement schools had a prior relationship with the program or had hosted preservice teachers in previous years. Overall, these findings suggest a need for a stronger emphasis on the situated learning of teaching skills in the classroom, particularly assessment and classroom management.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of focus groups is that they can be less effective in tasks involving brainstorming items (Guest et al., 2017). Furthermore, focus groups can be less effective at uncovering comprehensive data (Guest, et al., 2017). Future studies should explore the logistical and structural implications of strengthening university-district partnerships. For example, what are the policies, key personnel, and resource allocations at the district and university that facilitate meaningful partnerships?

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