

A Comparison of the Internship Experience for Student Interns Placed in Different Urban School Environments

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if there was a difference in the internship experience between student interns placed in either an urban Professional Development School or an urban non-Professional Development School. Student interns from two urban universities who have partnerships with neighboring urban school districts participated in this investigation. The Student Internship Experience Survey was used to identify differences between the experiences, based on the following measures: (a) Commitment to the Profession, (b) Teaching for Real/Context Based Learning, (c) Reflective Practitioner, (d) Approach to Urban/At-Risk Learners, and (e) Self-Efficacy. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted, and revealed that differences based on the five measures between internship experiences in a Professional Development School setting and a non-Professional Development School setting could not be identified.

Teaching in an urban school district can be a challenging endeavor for even the most competent and experienced teacher. For the novice teacher, it can be especially daunting and frustrating, to say the least. Haberman (1995) described this experience for beginners “. . . as an extraordinary life experience—a volatile, highly charged, emotionally draining, physically exhausting experience” (p. 1). The intensity, profound economic disparity, and inequalities are often beyond belief for many of those new to the profession, and contribute to high attrition rates (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004; Haberman, 1995; Kozol, 1991).

According to the National Commission for Teaching and America’s Future (2002), 50% of urban teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their career, citing lack of support, behavior problems, and lack of adequate preparation for the demands of urban teaching as the factors influencing their decisions to leave (Dill & Stafford-Johnson, 2003; Stafford & Haberman, 2003; Haberman, 1995). Furthermore, in some urban districts, this turnover period can be as short as three years (Haberman, 1995). This is especially alarming since teacher quality has been

identified as the foremost indicator of students’ scholastic success (Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Over three million teacher vacancies over the next decade are predicted by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2002), and a preponderance of these openings will be at urban district schools (United States Department of Education, 2002). What makes this situation even more critical is that urban districts face a greater challenge with hiring and retaining fully credentialed teachers, especially in the areas of mathematics, science, special education and bilingual education, when compared to both their suburban and rural counterparts (Dill & Stafford-Johnson, 2003; Stafford & Haberman, 2003; Olson & Jerald, 1998; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). This disparaging dilemma can be attributed to the intractable social hardships and debilitating conditions that urban teachers must confront (Olson & Jerald, 1998). The legacies of concentrated poverty, neighborhood crime and violence, adult despair and discouragement, and family instability that pervade urban communities contribute to the difficulties and challenges for effective teaching and student success (Olson & Jerald, 1998).

It is quite evident that teacher preparation programs and urban school districts are faced with a monumental task for preparing and recruiting high quality teachers to work in urban students. Meeting such a lofty challenge requires forging partnerships among K-12 teachers, administrators, and the higher education community. The Professional Development School model, which emerged from the Holmes Partnership, holds the potential to provide teacher candidates with the necessary guidance, early experiences in the field, and the opportunity to learn from experts on site within an urban context (Abdal-Haqq, 1998).

The Internship Experience

The internship experience, or student teaching, is usually identified as the most significant and crucial component of the teacher preparation program. However, traditional teacher education programs and internship requirements tend to be universal, rather than focused, which may contribute to the notion that teacher candidates are not adequately prepared for the ideology needed for working with urban children (Dill & Stafford-Johnson, 2003; Meyerson, 2001; Haberman, 1995).

Although there is a broad consensus that high quality and practical field experiences are crucial for learning to teach, the research base is inconclusive on the effectiveness of various internship experiences (Allen, 2003). Furthermore, the Education Commission of the States (2003) reported that this lack of a sound research base indicates the need to develop a strong field experience that unites professional practice and methodology coursework. Vereen (2002) proposed that internship experiences should also be designed specifically to increase the student interns' feeling of self-efficacy in urban school teaching, since numerous studies have documented its' effect on teaching success. For example, Chester & Beaudin (1996) investigated the effect of change on self-efficacy beliefs, teacher characteristics, and instructional practices. Involving over 173 urban teachers, they concluded that providing opportunities for collegial interactions and teacher reflection fostered positive changes in efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, studies conducted by Benton & Richardson (1993)

and Neubert & Bilko (1998) showed an increase in professional efficacy of student interns placed in a Professional Development School environment when compared to student teachers in a non-Professional Development School environment.

According to the Holmes Group (1990), Professional Development Schools are far more than laboratory schools for university research, demonstration sites for displaying best practice, or merely settings for preservice teachers to gain clinical experiences. Rather, Professional Development Schools are places where teachers, administrators, and university faculty come together to deliberate on and find solutions for problems of student learning (Gardner & Libde, 1999). Teaching in the Professional Development School is to be shared by university faculty and school teachers. Classroom teachers and university faculty engage in collaborative research on educational practice. Preservice teachers are supervised by both school administrators and university faculty. Professional Development Schools, are by design, places for the ongoing professional development of preservice teachers, novice teachers, veteran teachers, and for continued research on teaching and learning (Lunenberg, 1998). They are designed to be communities of learning.

Internship experiences in urban Professional Development Schools are designed to better prepare student interns for teaching in high-poverty school environments, and working with urban students. Emphasis is placed on collaboration between partners. This is especially vital to the development of preservice teachers since the literature confirms that the long-term success for many prospective candidates is sometimes impaired by the lack of expert guidance, support, and opportunities to reflect on their teaching practices (Veenman, 1984). Wilson, Miller, and Yerkes (1993) explained that true collaboration demands that educators move from traditional practices of teaching, and transcend into thinking of new approaches and practices.

Although experience requirements and opportunities are unique for each partnership, the overall purpose is to assist student interns in addressing the ideological context of 'urban' in their pedagogical and assessment practices, to

critically analyze their current belief systems and practices, and to expand their knowledge base and widen their world views regarding diversity (Holmes Group, 1990).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare an urban Professional Development School internship experience with that of a traditional experience in a similar urban non-Professional Development School. The research question that guided this investigation was:

1. Is there a difference in the internship experience between student interns who completed their internship experience in an urban Professional Development School and student interns who completed their internship in an urban non Professional Development School as measured by (a) Commitment to the Profession, (b) Teaching for Real/Context Based Learning, (c) Reflective Practitioner, (d) Approach to Urban/At-Risk Students, and (f) Self Efficacy?

Methods

Participants

Approximately 59 student interns participated in this study, and were placed in urban elementary schools, which were located in two large, urban metropolitan school districts. Of this population, 29 student interns completed their internship experience in urban Professional Development School sites within the participating districts. The original population of student interns consisted of 30 subjects. However, one student intern experienced difficulty in meeting the demands of teaching in an urban school setting, and, therefore was excluded from the study. Subjects were matched on the variables of school profile, grade point average (.00-.09), teaching experience, length of experience, and qualifications of their clinical faculty members.

Participating universities had similar internship requirements, however, the length of the experience differed slightly. One university required two 7-week placements. These placements would be in the same school environment, but at different grade levels. The other participating

university required one 16 week placement within the same grade level. Upon examination of the specific requirements for each university, it was noted that the only difference between the two placements was an additional 2 week observation period for the 16 week placement. The researchers believed that this would not pose a significant concern since the subjects were matched on the length of their experience. All assigned clinical faculty members had at least 3 years of teaching experience. Clinical faculty members for the urban Professional Development Schools were selected by a Steering Committee, while the urban non-Professional Development School faculty members were selected by their building principals.

Procedures

All student interns were administered the Student Teaching Experience Survey at the conclusion of their student teaching experience. The Student Teaching Experience Survey contained 103 Likert-type items based on a scale from "Almost Always" to "Almost Never." This questionnaire survey was designed to assess student interns' and student teachers' experiences based on the following measures: (a) Commitment to the Profession, (b) Teaching for Real/Context Based Learning, (c) Reflective Practitioner, (d) Approach to Urban/At-Risk Learners, and (e) Self-Efficacy. Developed by the researchers, this instrument was based on the current literature, research, and operating model of Professional Development Schools. With regard to content-related validity, the Student Teaching Experience Survey was reviewed and evaluated by three university faculty members who are nationally recognized for their experience and expertise with the Professional Development School reform effort. They were given the task of critiquing the list of statement and making recommendations as to the clarity and readability of each survey instrument. They also examined the instrument to judge categorical placement of each item.

The Student Teaching Experience Survey was also field tested with student interns from two urban universities who were not involved with this investigation. This allowed the researcher to identify ambiguities, misunderstandings, and

other inadequacies, and make the necessary modifications to clarify the survey items. To address the internal consistency reliability of the five subscales of this instrument, Coefficient alpha (Crombach’s alpha) was computed, and the results ranged from .71 to .83, indicating that the internal consistency of each subscore was reliable.

Results

Data from the Student Teaching Experience Survey was analyzed using Descriptive Statistics, and a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Mean scores of each group indicated that the urban Professional Development School student interns scored slightly higher on each of the five measures. These results are reported in Table 1.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), a statistical technique for determining differences between groups on more than one dependent variable, was conducted to compare the internship experiences as measured by (a) Commitment to the Profession, (b) Teaching for Real/Context Based Learning, (c) Reflective Practitioner, (d) Approach to Urban/ At-Risk Learners, and (e) Self-Efficacy. It can be seen in Table 2 that the Wilks’ Lambda, when transformed to an F value, was not statistically significant at the .05 level. Thus, when the five measures were considered simultaneously, there was not a significant difference between the urban Professional Development School internship experience and the urban non Professional Development School internship experience.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations

Group	Commitment to the Profession	Real/Context Based Learning	Reflective Practitioner	Approach to Urban/ At-Risk	Self Efficacy
Professional Development School Student Interns (N=29)					
M	106.31	118.83	90.07	60.17	26.66
SD	13.68	16.51	12.58	10.28	4.02
Non-Professional Development School Student Teachers (N=30)					
M	100.13	115.60	85.17	55.23	25.80
SD	16.07	17.65	14.99	8.84	3.93

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Source of Variation	Wilks’ Lambda	Between df	Error df	Multivariate F
Group	.87	5	53	.20

N=59

Discussion of Findings

The data from this study suggest that there was not a significant difference in the internship

experience of student interns in an urban Professional Development School setting and student interns in an urban non-Professional Development

School setting as measured by the 5 variables. The MANOVA yielded a nonsignificant *F* when the mean vector scores were collectively considered.

The results indicate that, although more concentrated efforts were made in the Professional Development School environment to equip the student interns with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions to meet success in an urban school environment, the student interns placed in a non-Professional Development School also believed their internship provided them with rich experiences to assist them in their development as an urban educator, and to understand the demands of urban school teaching. This suggests that Professional Development School partnerships need to make these concentrated efforts much earlier and throughout the teacher preparation program. For example, the emphasis on “urban pedagogy” can be in place when the student interns begin their observation requirements in an urban school setting, and continue throughout their preparation tenure. This will allow the student interns more time to internalize the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions needed to be an effective educator in an urban school environment.

One also needs to consider the maturity of each PDS partnership when interpreting the results. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Standards for Professional Development Schools (2001) provides specific criteria for the identification of partnership stages. These developmental guidelines outline “. . . the degree of commitment, level of expertise, the degree of institutionalization and support, and the impact the PDS partnership has outside its partnering institutions” (p. 6). A total of 6 Professional Development School sites were involved in this investigation, and of these, 3 sites were identified as being at the “Developing Level” and 3 were at the “At Standard” Level. The criteria for each of these levels include:

- Developing Level — Partners are pursuing the mission of the PDS partnership and there is partial institutional support. At the developing stage, partners are engaged in PDS work in many ways. However, their

supporting institutions have not yet made changes in their policies and practices that would provide evidence of institutionalization.

- At Standard — The mission of the PDS partnership is integrated into the partnering institutions. PDS work is expected and supported, and it reflects what is known about the best practices. At this stage partners work together effectively resulting in positive outcomes for all learners. Partnering institutions have made changes in policies and practices that reflect what has been learned through PDS work, and that support PDS participants in meaningful ways (NCATE, 2001, p. 7).

The results of this study may have been influenced because 3 of the PDS were identified as being at the “Developing Level,” and not “At Standard,” this, may have influenced the results of the study. The partnerships were still developing at these sites, and these schools were not yet in a position to meet the criteria set forth by the Holmes Partnership for Professional Development Schools, even though they met the “Developing Level” standards set forth by NCATE.

Data from this investigation also suggests that other urban school settings not identified as a Professional Development School site may be just as effective in providing student teachers with meaningful internship experiences that highlight collaboration, commitment, contextual teaching, self-efficacy, and working with urban, at-risk students. However, the expectations and support of each cooperating teacher, the working conditions and climate of each school, and the leadership of the building administrators may have been the significant contributors impacting the student teachers perception of their internship experience.

Recommendations for Further Investigation

Further study is needed to determine if the Professional Development School reform effort needs to broaden its scope in the fundamental changes the partnerships are willing to make. For example, the partnering universities and schools involved in this investigation, focused only on

providing additional support and initiatives during the internship experience. More restructuring efforts need to be made throughout the teacher education program. Doing so would allow the university-school partnership to explore the prospect of redefining how best to prepare urban teachers, and the quality and kinds of experiences that contributes to teacher candidates' development.

Future investigation is also needed involving a larger population sample and with different Professional Development School settings. This will allow educators to ascertain the specific changes that are occurring at the different sites, and the ways that these changes are affecting the teacher candidates' learning during the internship experience. Finally, levels of the partnership relationship, as identified by NCATE, should be considered in future investigations. Researchers may want to consider only utilizing Professional Development Schools "At-Standard" levels when comparing to non-Professional Development Schools sites because they have met specific criteria and guiding principles essential to the success of Professional Development Schools.

Professional Development Schools seek to create ambitious learning communities for the improvement of teacher education programs and practices. The Holmes Partnership communicates this goal by stating:

A primary aim of Professional Development Schools will be to contribute to intellectually solid programs of teacher education that intertwine the wisdom of theory and practice; that encourage shared conceptions among university and school faculty; that assist novices in evaluating, integrating, and using knowledge from multiple sources; that convey the moral basis of teaching; and that recruit and keep imaginative and interesting teachers in the profession. (Holmes Group, 1990, p. 48)

For university-school partnerships to see the tangible results of achieving this goal, more ambitious restructuring needs to be made in the teacher preparation program. Short term programs and initiatives alone do not constitute a

high quality internship experience. The Holmes Group (1990) elaborates on what is needed to achieve this goal by presenting the following 6 guiding principles essential to the success of each partnership:

1. All students would participate seriously in learning for understanding.
2. Schools and classrooms would be organized as learning communities.
3. Social barriers would not exclude children from participating in learning.
4. All members of the community would engage in learning.
5. Community members (teachers, administrators, and teacher educators) would collaborate in researching and reflecting on teaching and learning practices.
6. Principles demanded by the PDS would require such substantial changes, that institutions would need to be re-invented.

In order for a Professional Development School to fulfill its mission, these guiding principles must be in place.

The preparation of teachers for urban schools is considered a "distinctive enterprise" (Haberman, 1994). Preparation "... occurs in schools, with children, while functioning in the role of teacher with the help of a coach or mentor ..." (Haberman, 1994, p. 22). To move forward, Professional Development School partnerships must agree upon and focus on essential elements and experiences that define a high quality and practical urban field internship, so that future teachers "... will succeed and serve in schools with less than ideal working conditions serving diverse children in poverty" (Haberman, 1994, p. 1).

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