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ABSTRACT

This study examined teacher education graduates' perceptions of the effects of their educational preparation curriculum on teaching success in their first 3 years in the classroom. Surveys examined respondents' level of satisfaction with content area preparation, preparation in working with diverse students, preparation for developing professional communications and collaborative skills, preparation in instructional methodology, specific coursework, and the overall program. Overall, graduates reported strong positive levels of satisfaction with three facets of their program: content area preparation, instructional methodology, and ability to create a learner centered community. They had somewhat positive perceptions of their preparation for student diversity and strong positive perceptions of their preparation for being reflective practitioners who demonstrate a commitment to learning, improving the profession, and maintaining professional ethics. They had only somewhat positive perceptions of their preparation for being an advocate, communication, collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues, and professional development. They had strong perceptions of satisfaction with their preparation in elementary education, reading, special education, and early childhood coursework. Those who took bilingual education coursework were less satisfied with preparedness in comparison to other specialization responses. Overall, graduates had strong positive perceptions of satisfaction with their preparedness to teach. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

Teachers For Our Nation's Schools

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TEACHERS FOR OUR NATION'S SCHOOLS

Introduction

The shortage of qualified teachers for our nation's schools has been a well publicized reality which school administrators and their constituent communities have increasingly had to deal with in recent years. Colleges and universities have also had their own version of the problem, whereby on the one hand they are under increased pressure by state and regional certifying agencies to maintain high level entrance and exit standards in order to guarantee that their graduates' credentials truly represent the potential of quality. The role of colleges and universities becomes one of truly preparing teacher candidates for meeting the needs of students of the twenty-first century rather than students of bygone eras. This includes being able to inspire young people in a climate of cultural plurality, which fosters educational opportunity for all. Many of the problems faced today, such as crime, drugs, and entrenched poverty, call for attitudes and methodologies which have not been adequately dealt with in the past. The opposite side of this issue is the "supply and demand" equation regarding entrants to the teaching profession, in that the more able – the "best and the brightest" – of our potentially new teachers are electing other vocational choices rather than teaching, where the rewards, working conditions, and opportunities for advancement are more attractive.

This paper reports on recent doctoral research conducted at a nearby regional university in the south central region of the United States. This study examined teacher education graduates' perceptions of effects of the educational preparation curriculum on

success in teaching in their first three years in the classroom. The issues examined range from content area preparation, to communication, working with diverse groups, instructional strategies, parental and colleague relationships, and other issues pertinent to teaching in today's world. Additionally, information is presented regarding the number of teacher education graduates in the sample studied who have remained in the profession as well as those who have left the field.

It is of great importance for school administrators to be cognizant of, and in communication with the teacher preparation institutions from which they recruit their teaching workforce. Collaborative relationships can be established between school systems and universities, whereby the true knowledge and skills necessary for teaching in today's schools can be communicated and understood by both. Field-based professional development programs can be developed whereby districts and universities both have input into teacher preparation, and where teachers are able to understand more fully and be better prepared for the nature of the work environment they will be entering.

Background

To become a teacher has always been a lofty aspiration that carried with it the high ideals of participants wanting to make a difference in the life of a child (Latham, 1998). While the pay was low and the hours were long, people still carried the desire to teach. Yet, one needs only to read a newspaper or watch television reports to see that educators are facing new challenges in today's schools, challenges that were beyond the realm of understanding when many teachers went through traditional teacher education

programs (McBee, 1999). Metal detectors grace the doors that welcome students into the world of education. Signs are prominently displayed at campus entrances stating guns are not allowed. Many metropolitan school districts have their own police forces to keep order on their campuses (Kalb, Davenport, & Foote, 1999). Teachers are frustrated with going to school to teach when their day revolves around everything but teaching (Bradford, 1999). Clearly, the deterioration of schools, students, and society have escalated to the point where they must be addressed because of their direct impact on the state of education in the United States and the future of our culture (Bracey, 1991).

In 1996, The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future published the findings of its two-year investigation into the educational challenges facing the United States (1996). The panel was composed of a group of 26 experts from the field of education and was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

They concluded that the reform of elementary and secondary education would depend upon a double pronged approach. First, the teaching profession must be restructured toward increasing teachers' knowledge to meet the demands they face in the classroom. Second, schools must be redesigned to support high-quality teaching and learning. The report offers a master plan for recruiting, preparing, supporting, and rewarding excellent educators so that all schools might have a caring, qualified teacher for every child.

Much has been written about teacher retention, job satisfaction, and what teachers need to be successful (Andrews, 1997; Grasmick & Leak, 1997; Hummel & Stom, 1987;

Marson & Pigge, 1987). While there have been efforts put forth in raising salaries across the United States, little else has been consistently established to attract highly qualified and competent people to the field of education. Many teachers must deal with the public's somewhat skewed view of teaching, a high incidence of less than optimal working conditions, and the lack of prestige for their chosen profession (Lucas, 1997). Clearly, the importance and depth of the commitment that teachers bring to education needs to be better articulated to the public.

As the teacher preparation program reform movement begins to be addressed under the new certification requirements issued by many states, information regarding the effectiveness of current teacher preparation curriculum must be examined (Grasmick & Leak, 1997). Many proponents of educational reform hold the position that teacher preparation programs have not kept pace with the needs of the current school population. In this viewpoint, preparation programs are still structured to meet the needs of K-12 students from a past who no longer exists (Ambach, 1996; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995). A restructuring of the ideological framework behind the current college course requirements must be made to more realistically align what is taught at the university with what is actually needed by students in today's elementary and secondary schools. Teachers need more opportunities to observe, hypothesize, test, and reflect on ways to reach children who may have cultural backgrounds different from their own (McBee, 1998). In addition, instructional pedagogy must be developed that meets the needs of the diverse learners of the twenty first century (Ambach, 1996). As John

Goodlad (1990) states “there can be no universal education of our young people, however, unless the education of those who are to teach them is completely redesigned”

The Research Study

In 2000-2001 doctoral research was conducted at a nearby regional university in the south central region of the United States. The major purpose of the study was to examine what effect the institution’s educational preparation curriculum had on recent graduates as they began their professional teaching careers. Additional purposes were to evaluate the current strengths and weaknesses of the educator preparation program as it began the restructuring process leading to compliance with the new state certification requirements mandated for the Early Childhood-Grade 4 Generalist Certificate that is to be implemented by the 2002-2003 academic year. In this study the following research questions were posed: (1) What is the level of satisfaction with the content area preparation received, as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation program? (2) What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation of how to respond to diverse populations as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program? (3) What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation for developing professional communications and collaborative skills with parents, community and colleagues as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program? (4) What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation received in instructional methodology as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program? (5) What is the level of satisfaction with specific

coursework contained within the regional Educator Preparation Program as perceived by graduates of the regional university? (6) What is the level of satisfaction with the overall program within the regional university Educator Preparation Program as perceived by graduates of the regional university?

Population

The population for the study was the totality of 909 graduates of a four-year educator preparation program who had received elementary teacher certification from the years 1997 through spring, 2000. The initial sample was 505 individuals from the total population to compensate for a possible poor rate of return because of difficulty in locating all graduates. These 505 graduates were sent a packet that included a cover letter with an explanation of the purpose of the study, assurance of anonymity as well as careful instructions for completion and return of the completed questionnaire to the researcher.

As anticipated, a major problem with the survey returns seemed to be the mobility of the population. Of the 505 surveys that were originally mailed, 105 were initially returned undeliverable, with no forwarding address. A total of 196 surveys were returned providing usable data and 21 were returned by those not wishing to participate in the study. The researcher used internet and traditional phone books to attempt to locate the remaining 183 participants at their last known addresses. Twenty-one people had current phone numbers and the researcher contacted them by phone. Four responded and agreed to return a new survey packet, which they subsequently did, and their number

was added to the final total. Eleven did not return phone calls and/or messages that the researcher left with whoever answered the phone or on their answering machines. Six people did not want to participate. Data analysis and computational requirements were accomplished in March, 2001. The final number of usable returns was 196.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was designed to elicit graduates' perceptions of what effect their experiences in the teacher preparation program had on preparing them for a successful teaching experience. The questionnaire was developed and validated by the researcher, using input from current faculty and students at the regional university. There were three sections contained within the instrument. The General Information section of the questionnaire requested demographic information from each participant. Following in Part 1 were questions designed to address the level of preparedness as applied to specific teacher competencies outlined by the state of Texas. If participants answered "no" to question 2 or 3 (see discussion below) in the General Information section, they were asked to skip Part 1 of the questionnaire and proceed to Part 2. The questions in Part 2 gathered data pertaining to the effectiveness of each course offered in the teacher preparation program.

Profile of the Respondents

The data collected under General Information were gathered through four questions: (1) What year did you graduate from the regional university? (2) Are you

currently teaching? (3) Are you currently teaching in Texas? (4) What year did you begin to teach?

Based on the findings of the demographics of this study (N=196), 13.5% of the spring 2000 graduates responded, 25.4% from 1999, 38.9% from 1998, and 22.3% from 1997. Of those respondents, 90.2% were currently teaching and 95.1% of those teaching were teaching in Texas.

Data from the questionnaires provided the basis for analysis of the six research questions previously cited (p. 5). Research questions 1 through 4 were analyzed in the same manner. The first four questions in each section of the questionnaire were used to provide a focus for the respondents as to the course work they had taken. Only one question from each identified section was used in the analysis.

Results of the Study

Research Question #1 (as follows) was evaluated in two parts.

What is the level of satisfaction with the content area preparation received, as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program?

The first part of the question asked the respondents to rate via a 5-point Likert scale (1 = low; 5 = high) how each of the five specialization areas of study in the educator preparation program prepared them to develop their current content area knowledge base. The five areas of specialization are Elementary Education (EED), Early Childhood Education (ECE), Bilingual Education (BSL), Special Education (SPD), and Reading Education (RDG). The second part of survey question one asked for their overall perception of preparedness to develop their current content area knowledge base. Part

two of the questionnaire yielded the information that determined their overall perception of preparedness taking into account all specialization areas. A total of 85.7% responded positively while 1.7% negatively to the feeling of being prepared in current content area knowledge. The remainder, 12.6%, were neutral.

Implications. While the largest number of participants responded positively to their feeling of preparedness (85.7%) it should be noted that 52.9% of that number felt “moderately well prepared” and 19.0% felt “somewhat well prepared”. At 71.9%, this should be considered a positive relationship in preparedness to develop their content area knowledge base. The comparison between “not prepared at all” (1.7 %) and “very well prepared” (13.8 %) is clearly a strong positive perception. This should be considered an area of strength for the Educator Preparation Program.

Research Question #2 (as follows) was also evaluated in two parts.

What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation of how to respond to diverse populations as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program?

The first part of the question asked the respondents to rate how each of the five specialization areas of study in the teacher preparation program prepared them to respond to diverse populations. The second part of this question asked for their overall perception of preparedness to respond to diverse populations. From the data analysis, a total of 74.4% responded positively while 6.3% negatively to the feeling of being prepared to respond to diverse populations. The remainder, 19.3%, were neutral.

Implications. While the largest number of participants responded positively to their feeling of preparedness (74.4 %) it should be noted that 38.6% of that number

actually felt “moderately well prepared” and 19.3% “somewhat well prepared”. With 57.9% of the respondents, this should be of concern because it does not provide a definitive feeling of positive preparedness to respond to diverse populations. The comparison between “not prepared at all” (6.3%) and “very well prepared” (16.5%) is clearly a strong positive perception, however, it only accounts for 22.8% of the respondents. With all of the data considered, this is an area that met the needs of most respondents but should be revisited as diversity issues continue to emerge.

Research Question #3 (as follows) was evaluated using three questions from the survey.

What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation for developing professional communications and collaborative skills with parents, community and colleagues as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program?

Each question was evaluated in two parts. The first part of the question(s) asked the respondents to rate how each of the five specialization areas of study in the teacher preparation program prepared them to a specific part of the competency. The second part of each question asked for overall perception of preparedness to a specific part of the competency.

In responding to the perception of preparedness in being an advocate and having effective communication skills, a total of 72.8% responded positively while 6.4% responded negatively to this question. The remainder, 20.8%, were neutral.

In the evaluation of the perception of being prepared to be an effective practitioner demonstrating a commitment to learning, improving the profession and

maintaining professional ethics, a total of 83.3% responded positively while 4.0% negatively to this question. The remainder, 12.6% were neutral.

The response to the evaluation of the perception of being prepared for collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues reported a total of 72.5% responding positively while 10.9% responded negatively to this question. The remainder, 16.7% were neutral.

Further results examined the perception of being prepared to grow professionally after graduation. A total of 65.5% responded positively while 9.8% responded negatively to this question. The remainder, 24.7%, were neutral.

Implications. While the largest number of participants responded positively to their feeling of being prepared in being an advocate and effective communication skill (72.8%), it should be noted that 42.2% of that number actually felt only “moderately well prepared” and 15.6% “somewhat well prepared” for a total of 57.8%. This should be of concern because it does not provide a definitive feeling of positive preparedness to respond to being an advocate for education and having effective communication skills. The comparison between “not prepared at all” (6.4%) and “very well prepared” (15.0%) is clearly a positive. This is an area of the Educator Preparation Program that warrants further examination.

A total of 83.3% of participants responded positively to their feeling of preparedness in being a reflective practitioner demonstrating a commitment to learning, improving the profession and maintaining professional ethics. The number of respondents feeling “moderately well prepared” (40.2%) and “somewhat well prepared”

(12.1%) account for 52.3% of the responses. It is the comparison between the “not prepared at all” (4.0%) and “very well prepared” (31.0%) that provides the strongest positive perception of preparedness with 35% of the respondents included. Clearly, this is an area of strength in the Educator Preparation Program

In addressing the question of being prepared in collaborate relationships with parents and colleagues, 72.5% of participants responded positively. It should be noted that 39.7% of that number actually felt only “moderately well prepared” and 16.1% “somewhat well prepared.” While representing 55.8% of the respondents, this should be of concern because it does not provide a definitive feeling of positive preparedness. The concern becomes more pronounced when comparing “not prepared at all” and “very well prepared.” The comparison between “not prepared at all” (10.9%) and “very well prepared” (16.7%) does not provide enough of a difference to draw a positive perception for this part of the question. This also represents the largest percentage of people (10.9%) responding negatively. When evaluating all of the data presented, this area should be addressed by the Educator Preparation Program as one having potential concern.

In addressing the issue of being prepared to grow professionally after graduation, 65.5% of participants responded positively. It should be noted that 29.9% felt “moderately well prepared” and 13.8% “somewhat well prepared”. This is 43.7% of the respondents and should be of concern when compared with the other percentages in the table. There is a relationship between perception of being “very well prepared” (21.8%) and “not prepared at all” (9.8%). In analyzing all of the data received addressing this

issue, this question requires further study and should be examined closely for areas to improve.

Research Question #4 (as follows) was evaluated in two parts of the questionnaire and each question had two parts.

What is the level of satisfaction with the preparation received in instructional methodology as perceived by graduates of the regional university Educator Preparation Program?

The first part of each question asked the respondents to rate how each of the five specialization areas of study in the Educator Preparation Program prepared them for a specific competency. Question one asked the respondents to rate their perception of being prepared in instructional methods, materials and strategies. The second question asked the respondents to apply the same rating to the perception of being prepared in creating a learner-centered community. The second part of each question asked for overall perception of preparedness to the specific competency. In addressing the perception of being prepared in instructional methods, materials, and strategies, a total of 86.3% responded positively while 4.0% negatively. The remainder, 9.7%, were neutral. The issue of respondents' perceptions of being prepared in creating a learner centered community resulted in a total of 83.8% responding positively while 2.9% negatively to the feeling of being prepared. The remainder, 13.3%, were neutral.

Implications. While the largest number of participants responded positively to their feeling of preparedness (86.3%) it should be noted that 40.0% of that number actually felt "moderately well prepared" and 15.4% "somewhat well prepared" for a total of 55.4%. This should be of some concern because it does not provide a definitive

perception of positive preparedness in the subset area of instructional methods, materials and strategies when analyzed alone. On the other hand, the comparison between “not prepared at all” (4.0%) and “very well prepared” (30.9%) is clearly a strong positive perception and accounts for 34.9% of the respondents. With all data considered, this remains an area of strength in the Educator Preparation Program.

When considering the 83.8% of respondents who positively felt prepared in creating a learner centered community, 52.6% felt “moderately well prepared” and 16.2% felt “somewhat well prepared”. At 68.8%, this shows a strong perception of preparedness in this competency. The comparison between “very well prepared” (15.0%) and “not prepared at all (2.9%)” also demonstrates a relationship. When using both comparisons, this is an area of strength in the Educator Preparation Program.

Research Question #5 (as follows) was analyzed as explained below.

What is the level of satisfaction with specific course work contained within the regional university Educator Preparation Program as perceived by graduates of the regional university?

Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the mean response and standard deviations of the respondents’ perceptions of preparedness to teach in each of the areas of specialization offered by the regional university educator preparation program. Three of the program areas, elementary (n=176, \underline{M} =3.6136), special education (n=163, \underline{M} =3.2515) and reading (n=175, \underline{M} =3.6514) reported the largest number of participants and had the most consistent mean Likert scores. Early Childhood (n= 111) reported a respectable number of respondents and showed a positive perception in their feeling of preparedness (\underline{M} = 3.2613). Bilingual education was the smallest number of reporting participants (n=

86) and was evaluated as having a less than positive perception of preparedness ($M=2.8488$). While the $SD=1.0235$ is reasonable, this should be a concern of the Educator Preparation Program and should be examined as the mean is at the average.

Research Question #6 (as follows) was analyzed in the following manner.

What is the level of satisfaction with the overall program within the regional university Educator Preparation Program as perceived by graduates of the university?

The mean response and standard deviation of the respondents' perceptions of the overall Educator Preparation Program was analyzed comparing those who are currently teaching in Texas with those who are not. Of the 172 respondents currently teaching in Texas, a mean ($M = 3.6221$, $SD = 1.2246$) was reported. In examining the 19 who reported that they were not currently teaching in Texas, they also showed a strong positive association ($M = 3.5789$, $SD = 1.3464$) in their satisfaction with the Educator Preparation Program.

In examining respondents' perceptions by those currently teaching in Texas and the year they graduated, there is a consistent positive relationship in their satisfaction with how they were prepared to teach in the Educator Preparation Program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In the first place, graduates of the Educator Preparation Program perceive a strong positive level of satisfaction with content area preparation, instructional methodology and in creating a learner centered community facets of their training program. Graduates also perceive a somewhat positive perception of their preparation in responding to diverse

populations within the Educator Preparation Program. Additionally, graduates perceive a strong positive perception of preparedness in the area of being a reflective practitioner who demonstrates a commitment to learning, improving the profession and maintaining professional ethics within the educator preparation program. Graduates perceive only a somewhat positive perception of their preparation in being an advocate, communication, collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues and being prepared to grow professionally after graduation within the educator preparation program.

Regarding content area preparation, the graduates have a strong perception of satisfaction with their preparation in Elementary, Reading, Special Education and Early Childhood course work. However, those graduates who took Bilingual Education course work were less satisfied in their perception of preparedness with Bilingual Education course work in comparison with other specialization responses. In the total analysis, there was a strong positive perception of satisfaction from graduates of 2000, 1999 and 1997 with their overall feeling of preparedness to teach.

Recommendations

The recommendation section is divided into two areas: (a) recommendations for the program based on the study and (b) recommendations for further research.

Program Issues

The Bilingual Education Program must be examined in the near future to determine the reasons why there is only a moderate perception of adequately preparing respondents

to teach in that particular area. The Educator Preparation Program and faculty should use the information gathered through the existing exit interviews at the completion of the student teaching semester for evaluation of the perception of preparedness to teach in each area. This would provide information for addressing a potential concern before it becomes a major issue.

Also, a more effective method of tracking graduates should be implemented where current addresses would be updated as necessary. From the information gathered, a data base should be compiled that identifies where the regional university's graduates are teaching. This would provide the Educator Preparation Program with valuable information of the demographic issues and student populations that their graduates are experiencing. Additionally, it would be useful to have a periodic mailing of a newsletter to graduates that would outline current information about the preparation program and to solicit comments and suggestions for program improvements from graduates about specific issues they are facing in the schools. This would confirm current addresses of graduates and provide a space for new address information. This also would assist with identifying the school districts where their graduates are teaching.

A mentoring/outreach program should be established to support the graduates of the Educator Preparation Program at the regional university. Such a program would have a two-fold benefit by providing support for the graduates and giving the faculty valuable insights into what graduates are facing in the school. These data would be used as a basis to adjust and make modifications to the teacher preparation program.

All areas of the Educator Preparation Program should be evaluated and reviewed on an annual basis to insure that the needs of the educational community and the regional university Educator Preparation Program graduates continue to be met. The Educator Preparation Program and faculty should continue to evaluate the needs of the students and the community as well as the needs of professional practicing teachers as issues of diversity evolve. Course work should be adjusted within the Educator Preparation Program to better address the current and real life situations the graduates will encounter in today's schools and society. The Educator Preparation Program faculty should examine such issues as relating to professional communications and collaborative skills with parents, community and colleagues.

Further Research

This study should be replicated with graduates whose focus is secondary and/or middle school students. Further research of the needs of a wider range of educators would help other levels in professional preparation programs better meet the needs of their graduates. A study that examines the specific issue of course work contained in educator preparation programs would provide detailed information about how specific classes are meeting the needs of the graduates.

As a means of gaining richer, more personalized data, a qualitative methodology should be utilized for a similar study using the interview method. Also, a longitudinal study of graduates should be conducted in yearly increments to measure the changing needs of educators and the educational community. Additionally, the study should be

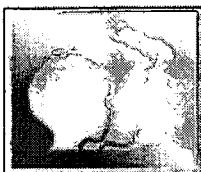
replicated using gender, ethnicity and age as subsets of the population as well as employing a sampling from the educator preparation programs within the Texas State University system.

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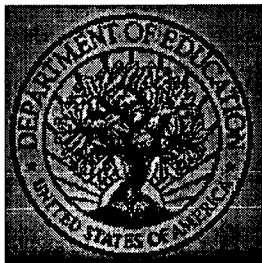
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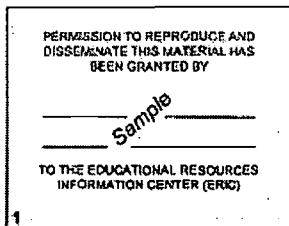
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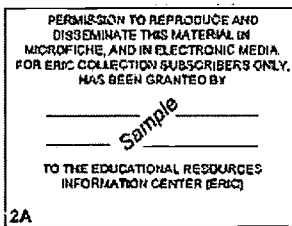
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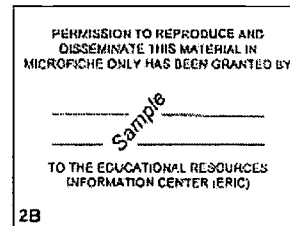
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