

Blazing a New Path: Collaborating Towards Best Practice in Urban Teacher Education

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Abstract

This study utilized qualitative means to gain a better understanding of the experiences of faculty members from a school of education, college of arts and sciences, and K-12 urban educators as they worked across academic disciplines to create and implement a collaborative secondary urban teacher fellowship program. This study is meant to inform the larger field of urban education on pathways to successful collaboration between universities and K-12 urban schools, as well as between education and content area faculties at the university level engaged in teacher preparation reform efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research study is to more deeply understand the experiences of school of education faculty members, college of arts and sciences faculty members, and K-12 urban educators collaborating across academic disciplines to develop and implement a graduate level urban teaching fellowship experience at an independent liberal arts institution.

This work is informed by theories on collaboration in university teaching, collaborative reform in teacher education, and culturally responsive practice. University teaching has long been thought of as a solitary endeavor (Anderson, 1996), yet many faculty members have discovered the benefits of being part of a group. Johnston (1997) notes that collaborative efforts lead faculty to experience more success with different curricula, various approaches to teaching and extended learning for themselves and their students. Briggs (2007) finds that curricular collaboration undertaken in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) creates a context in which ongoing program renewal occurs. However, while collaboration between faculty members is often featured in education program descriptions, many of these programs do not describe the nature of that collaboration (Brownell et. al., 2005). Stein and Short (2001) found several barriers for collaboration between university faculties, including: negative attitudes, worry of hidden agendas, lack of interpersonal skills, and lack of

support from university policy and procedure. Given the critical role of collaboration between content area and education departments at liberal arts institutions, it is important to examine the perspectives of faculty members across the university who work collaboratively to create and sustain teacher education programs.

Because teacher education requires university/school partnerships, it is also important to examine the perspectives of K-12 teachers and administrators who work collaboratively with university faculty to create and sustain teacher education programs, particularly those programs featuring clinical immersion or teacher residencies. In a case study about the development of professional development schools at Ohio State University, collaboration is characterized as a challenging and “fragile process on which to base a reform agenda” (Johnston, Brosnan, Cramer & Dove, 2000, p.3), but also as a powerful tool for the transformation of teacher education. Research on exemplary teacher education programs finds that teacher education reform requires institutional change before universities and schools can operate together as part of a community that values, supports and incentivizes high-quality teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Successful university/school partnerships take time to build and are characterized by mutual trust, honest communication, common goals, shared governance, and a commitment to sustaining a culture of inquiry (Patterson, Michelli & Pacheco, 1999).

Collaboration is particularly important in teacher education programs committed to preparing high-quality teachers for urban schools. The teacher education faculty at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee exemplifies an understanding of collaboration as an urban education imperative, since “to meet the complex needs of urban children and youth, the collaborative expertise of professionals in general and special education, family members, agency personnel and other community members will be required” (Pugach, Winn, Ford, & Jett-Simpson, 1997, p.4). A case study of the Urban Teacher Education Program at Indiana University Northwest indicates that master urban teachers play an important role in developing teacher education curriculum, which requires the creation of equity—and creates equity—among district teachers and university professors (Sandoval, Reed & Attinasi, 1993). Boston Teacher Residency Program and Chicago’s Academy for Urban School Leadership are currently rebalancing the equation for collaboration in school/university partnerships in favor of district-based urban teacher education (Solomon, 2009; Berry, Montgomery & Snyder, 2008).

Finally, research focused on culturally responsive practice has the potential to inform any discussion of collaborative program development in urban teacher education. This body of work explores the various aspects of ethnic understanding that teachers must acquire to effectively educate students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2002) and challenges educators to explore the pedagogical manifestations of cultural values. Some researchers argue that U.S. schools operate under Eurocentric values and document various classroom interactions as evidence of this bias (Banks & Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Howard, 1999; Sleeter et. al., 2004). Most recently, this work has raised concerns about the ability of schools of education to adequately prepare highly qualified urban educators at the secondary level (Darling-Hammond

et. al., 2002) and has called for schools of education to work more collaboratively with K-12 practitioners and urban communities to create more comprehensive urban teacher education programs. This research should inform the ways in which universities build relationships with urban schools and communities, so the collaboration between institutions itself exemplifies culturally responsive practice.

University of Indianapolis: Communicating, Collaborating, Decision-Making

The University of Indianapolis (UIndy) is a small liberal arts institution, located in Indianapolis, Indiana that serves approximately 5,000 students. The university is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and a national survey found that students ranked UIndy faculty near the top in accessibility and helpfulness. Not surprisingly, given this student-centered approach, faculty members within the School of Education (SOE) and the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) at UIndy are committed to navigating the volatile waters of higher education collaboration. In 2002, the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges of Teacher Education (AILACTE) recognized UIndy as a program of distinction for the efforts made by both SOE and CAS in the creation of the Center of Excellence in Leadership for Learning (CELL). These two programs came together again in 2007 to create the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program.

Not surprisingly, the UIndy Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program has established partnerships with the Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township, the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township, and the Indianapolis Public Schools. The relationship between UIndy SOE and these three urban districts has been in place for more than five years. Historically, the relationship between UIndy and these schools has been typical as defined by Johnston (1997), but with the opportunity of creating the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellows Program the university decided to embark on a more reciprocal and dynamic experience for both university and K-12 faculties. Additionally, the K-12 partners were excited about this opportunity and willing to engage in program development activities with the UIndy faculties in efforts to grow their own future colleagues and have a more prominent voice in the teacher education process.

The Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation selected UIndy as one of four host institutions for its Indiana STEM Teaching Fellowships. The other three institutions selected are Purdue University, Ball State University, and Indiana University Purdue University—Indianapolis (IUPUI). Of these institutions, UIndy is the smallest institution; it is also the only private institution and the only liberal arts institution. The Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program (WWTFP), which is being scaled up in states across the country starting with Indiana, has two purposes: 1) to create the equivalent of the Rhodes Scholarship for teachers so as to recruit high-quality candidates into science and math teaching in urban and rural

high-need schools; and 2) to improve the quality of teacher education in America's colleges and universities through restructuring the curriculum and expanding the clinical experience. The components of the Foundation's Fellowship program were informed by Arthur Levine's work (2006).

UIndy has used the \$500,000 in grant money provided by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the Lilly Endowment to create a new 36-hour Urban Teacher Residency Program leading to the Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Here are some of the highlights of the program:

- ***The program has adopted a cohort model.*** Fellows take all courses together, either as a full cohort or in three content-area cohorts, and Fellows are placed together in urban schools representing three partnering districts.
- ***The program immerses Fellows in urban schools from day one of the program.*** The clinical component of the program places Fellows in urban schools three days a week during the fall semester and five days a week during the spring semester. For the sake of continuity, Fellows are assigned to a focus class in one partnering district to participate in for the entire year. However, Fellows have extensive experiences in all three partnering districts as well as several urban charter schools.
- ***District teacher-leaders are an essential part of the program.*** The program has hired seven clinical faculty members who are exemplary urban math and science teachers in the partnering districts. These clinical faculty members collaborate with the program's clinical/mentoring coordinator and the cooperating mentor teachers to facilitate the Fellows' clinical experiences, and serve as university supervisors during the spring full-time student teaching experience.
- ***Fellows are mentored during their first three years of teaching in an urban high-need school.*** The mentoring program includes two years of intensive one-on-one coaching and a third year built around urban teacher-leadership.
- ***A challenging project-based curriculum will prepare Fellows to teach in 21st century schools.*** The partnering districts need teachers who are trained in project-based learning as well as more traditional teaching methods. However, as our district partners have said, and as Thomas (2000) has found, many teachers who are asked to create and implement project-based learning curricula lack the training to do so. The projects that comprise the Fellowship curriculum are carefully linked with clinical experiences, and several themes germane to urban education infuse the curriculum: literacy; equity and diversity perspectives; learning differences and special education; formative and summative assessment; rigorous and engaging content; and the application of theory and research to practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes an emergent qualitative design to explore how the UIndy SOE and CAS faculties collaborated with each other as well as K-12 urban partners to create the WWTF program. This article will specifically outline the journey this group of educators embarked upon to develop a new teacher education program within an existing school of education, made possible by the support of an outside funder.

Given that this program is currently in the initial stages of implementation, and given the histories of collaboration between faculty members on campus and with the SOE's K-12 partners, we recognized our opportunity to track the process of collaborative program development. This study was initiated by a junior faculty member whose research interests include collaboration and urban education. After receiving funding for the study, she partnered with a newly-hired junior faculty member to complete the study. Neither junior faculty member was affiliated with the program until after the study was completed. After data had been collected and de-identified, the program director became the third investigator of the study.

A qualitative emergent design was utilized (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam, 1997). Qualitative measures, including interviews and focus groups, were employed from an emergent perspective. Our interview protocol contained open-ended questions and we, as the researchers, were not assuming that we knew the experience. The data set includes interviews and focus groups conducted in spring 2009 that lasted from twenty minutes to one hour in length, as well as researcher notes kept during data collection. In order to capture the complexity of information and to gain insight, multiple perspectives were important to acknowledge. Participants from SOE, CAS, and K-12 settings were recruited, and recruitment procedures ensured that the participant groups included faculty, staff, and administrators to encompass as many views of the experience as possible. Fifteen total participants were interviewed, all of whom played a crucial role in the attainment, development, and/or first year implementation of the WWTF program. Of these, six were university administrators, five were university faculty in SOE or CAS, and four were K-12 educators from partnering schools. This group was made up of four men and eleven women, all of whom were white and middle class with at least a master's degree level education. By utilizing discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) to analyze various interview data—personal portrayals of the experience—this research relied on inductive reasoning to document emerging themes.

After receiving approval from the university's IRB for this study, interviews were audio taped and transcribed in their entirety. Member checking was employed. Interview transcriptions were returned to the interviewee to check for accuracy and to seek additional response. Interview protocols used in the study were constructed by the researchers in order to specifically target the aims of the research and to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Appendix A).

The researchers read and reread the transcripts several times as data collection took place. As recommended by Gee (2005), we analyzed the data—looking especially for participants’ sense of status and expectation, as well as impressions of earlier interactions—in order to “set the analysis of this narrative in the larger context of the whole” (p. 153). Following this method, we not only analyzed the words used by the participants literally, but also explored the context within which they described these events as well as the particulars of the events the participants described as important to them. We then began to construct categories or themes that emerged from the data collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam, 1997; Stake, 1995). Throughout the data collection process, the researchers analyzed the data and kept audit trails (research notes), as well as engaged in peer debriefing activities with each other as the data emerged.

RESULTS

In order to provide rich context, a narrative of the program attainment and development process is provided from researcher notes. Several themes emerged from the interview and focus group data collected in this study, and will serve as an organizing principle here: Leap of Faith; Collaborating; Decision-Making; and The Promised Land.

Program Development Process

An initial steering committee worked for a semester to search for a program director, to establish the program planning process and to appoint a program planning team that would consist of multiple stakeholders, such as K-12 partners and university faculty from SOE and CAS. The program director was hired and assumed the position in June 2008, and the program planning team met in June and July 2008 with the task of designing a new urban teacher education program with a math and science focus that was to be fully implemented in the subsequent fall semester. The program planning team consisted of K-12 teachers from partnering school districts, College of Arts and Sciences faculty, School of Education faculty, and a representative from the Center for Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL). Prior to meeting in the summer, all participants were given a copy of Linda Darling-Hammond’s book *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able To Do* (2005) to read in preparation for the summer retreat. Data reveal that little direction was given to the participants about what to do with the book, but there was an expectation that all participants read the book. Data also reveal that there was very little information disseminated about the program or the agenda prior to the program planning meetings in June 2008.

In the beginning of this summer retreat time, there were multiple conversations about what to develop in this new teacher education program; participants report that there were many instances of going around and around the same ideas. The leaders of the program planning team continued to look to the Woodrow Wilson Foundation grant guidelines for clarification as to the primary objectives of the to-be developed program. After a few days and on a tight schedule, the

program director, with expertise in fields outside of teacher education and the specific content areas taught in the program, redirected focus and articulated a framework for the program planning team. This framework was grounded in Linda Darling-Hammond's study of exemplary teacher education programs (2006), as well as in the grant guidelines and the K-12 partners' expressed interest in hiring teachers trained in project-based learning and other inquiry methodologies. The program development focus then shifted to emphasize the entire program, not course-by-course development, and much of the minutiae and specific implementation details were left out of this discussion to keep the focus on the program's overall design. A transition-to-teaching program existed at the university already, so a working pattern was available as a model. However, the decision makers in this summer retreat really wanted to see the Woodrow Wilson program become something unique and innovative. One of the charges from the Director and from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation was to develop a program that would help revolutionize teacher education.

Participants on the program planning team were divided into small groups. The small groups were: Curriculum Committee; Clinical and Mentoring Program Committee; Admission and Marketing Committee; Research and Evaluation Committee; and Unit Assessment System Committee. Through the small groups participants worked collaboratively, engaged in rich conversation, shared and discussed suggestions and ideas for development, and brought proposed ideas to the full group. The make-up of the groups provided multiple perspectives and voices, which added depth to the program as it developed. Further, the program planning team was charged with finding scholarly work to read, review, and use as a foundation and support to various program components, and a primary goal of the Unit Assessment System Committee was to align program development to the K-12 Academic Indiana State Standards. The data indicate a concerted effort on the part of everyone involved to make sure that program development went forward.

Leap of Faith

Each of the faculty members and K-12 educators interviewed for this study had varying degrees of understanding regarding program development and implementation efforts. It is interesting to note that administrators from both the university and the K-12 schools interviewed had greater degrees of knowledge about the program's inception, while university faculty members had greater knowledge of the program design and curriculum. Initial decision-making appears to have been top down from university administrators, while details such as program design and curriculum development were left to the full discretion of the university faculty and K-12 teachers.

Of high interest is the fact that all administrators in the study initially felt that this program was going to be either a great success or a huge failure. One noted, "This was either our chance to be truly innovative or recreate the status quo." While higher education endeavors like this have historically been grassroots initiatives originating with the faculty that then require

administrative approval, in this case the process was reversed. While some UIndy faculty reported angst around the curriculum development phase, the administrators reported angst around program inception and attainment. These administrative tensions then filtered down to faculty, who initially viewed administrative commitment to the program as an infringement of faculty academic freedom.

However, other faculty viewed administrative commitment to the program as the support they needed to break with the current status quo and implement an innovative program. One participant noted, "...there was a lot of tension around the WWTF program. People felt like it was rammed down their throats. There were people in the Ed department, I'm sure you've heard, that aren't happy about WW, and still aren't happy, and probably a year ago were probably less happy about it." Another participant said, "We left it to the faculty. It would either die or thrive because of their commitment." Another stated, "Because this was so new, administrative guidance was needed because the process was so unclear and the timeline was so fast." Across all participants, transparency of vision of the program and its goals were discussed as an overlying issue of concern.

Collaborating

Of high interest are the voices of the K-12 educators involved in the planning process. Many of these participants voiced concerns about their place in the process, noting that they were invited to meetings, but not given much background or follow-up information about decisions. Some K-12 educators reported feeling they were invited to take part in committee work so the university could say K-12 educators were at the table, but not authentically listened to as part of the program development. One K-12 participant felt that most of the curricular decisions had already been made and she was included as more of a "rubber stamp" than an expert in her content or in urban education. Another stated, "I'm still not sure how all of the parts work together. It would have been helpful to have gotten information before entering the meetings. I haven't heard anything since the summer meetings so I don't know where things are now." However, other K-12 educators liked the process and felt included as part of something new and innovative that would support their schools with high-caliber future colleagues. One participant noted, "I liked being part of the brainstorming process and dreaming. My preparation was never like this."

After participating in this collaborative planning process, some university educators welcomed the benefits of more authentic collaboration with K-12 partners. One faculty member noted, "We worked together and got along and liked each other, yet we've never really worked together as equals." While some of the K-12 participants felt the WWTF program development process was a time to dream big, the university faculty felt program planning added a large amount of work to already-heavy teaching and service loads. Many university faculty members felt they were included too much in the process and could not focus on their existing responsibilities during the curriculum development phase of the program. One participant stated,

“This faculty already has so much on their plates and this was just one more thing added. We couldn’t let the other programs fall to the side just to get this one up and going. It was very hard, but I think the hardest times are still coming.” Both SOE and CAS faculty also expressed angst about future workloads related to authentically running a new program.

Decision-Making

Examination of the data depicts a clear and distinct shift in the decision-making processes that occurred during the inception, development and implementation phases of this program. A semester after the initial announcement and award were made, the SOE administration changed and the WWTFP director was appointed. An overwhelming majority of participants note that these changes created a climate shift and ultimately led to the success of this program. K-12 and higher education faculty all noted that these new leaders were more supportive of innovation and “outside-the-box thinking.” One participant noted that “we actually started discussing details about resources and how to share load across SOE and CAS to authentically co-teach coursework” at the university level. Faculty participants shared their sense that key administrators sought to “walk their talk and not just give lip service to best practice.” Both K-12 and university faculties also felt that necessary guidance was given in order to get the program through the university curriculum approval process while maintaining a strong connection to emerging theories of best practice in urban education.

The leadership structure for this program differed from the usual lines of report at the university, which created some tension. The guidelines from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation required that, as one participant notes, “the Director reports to the Provost, which is totally outside of the university structure, and if anything has caused the most tension.” Additionally, “the idea is that for the three years we have this grant, that is the way it’s going to be. But some raise the question, now what is it going to be after that?”

The Promised Land

It is important to note that while the path to create and implement this program is taking us through uncharted waters, all participants express a sense of pride that the University of Indianapolis Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program has emerged as strong and innovative. One participant stated, “I feel good about this work. I feel like I was part of something that will have a meaningful impact on education and schools.” Others observe that being part of this planning process has impacted their own practice. One CAS faculty member noted, “Being part of the WWTF program has made me a better teacher. I use these experiences in my other courses as well. Overall, it really has been a good experience.” One administrator said, “I think a lot of the tension has ratcheted down for people, because again, they think it’s a good program. They think it’s a good thing.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We recognize that this study reflects the program development experiences of one university and their K-12 partners. However, we believe that the lessons we have learned might provide direction to other institutions as they embark on similar journeys. First, it is important to hear the voices of teacher education faculty and college of arts and sciences faculty as they collaborate across disciplines to create innovative models for urban teacher preparation. Second, it is important to hear the voices of K-12 urban educators discussing their perceptions of working collaboratively with universities, particularly given the push for universities and K-12 urban schools to work together to prepare highly qualified urban educators. Third, it is important to understand and anticipate the ways in which faculty, K-12 teachers, and administrators inhabit educational institutions which can both support and inhibit their collaborative efforts to reform teacher education, and to press for institutional change when necessary.

The following practices are recommended for universities and K-12 schools as they collaborate to create vibrant, innovative urban teacher education programs:

- *Authentic Collaboration.* It is crucial to ensure that the individuals brought into the program planning process are reform-minded faculty leaders and teacher leaders who collectively represent expertise in all aspects of urban teacher education. Some of the early challenges to the program planning process occurred because not everyone was at the table that should have been at the table. Further, all faculties involved in program planning (SOE, CAS, and K-12) should be given an equitable knowledge base, decision-making power, follow-up information, and tangible resources. Much angst was reported at all levels, especially among K-12 educators, that could have been curbed if the process had been more transparent, particularly in the early stages of program planning.
- *Deliberately Emergent Design.* If administrators procure funds for urban teacher education reform, they should clearly communicate their initial understanding of grant and program goals, mission, and outcomes at the beginning of the planning process. After that, it is important for administrators to provide all faculties (SOE, CAS, and K-12) with time, space, and tangible resources to allow the collaborative process to unfold and the program design and curricular details to emerge in an informed way, particularly in relation to the needs of urban school district partners. This type of structure ensures academic freedom, yet provides a directed framework within which SOE, CAS and K-12 faculties can work together creatively.
- *Relationship Building.* It is important to understand that the quality of the relationships developed during the planning process will play a substantial role in determining the success of the program itself. If strong relationships are built between individuals during the planning process, then those relationships will undergird the relationships between institutions and the program itself. These relationships must continue to be nurtured, and,

if so, they will develop in planned and surprising ways over time. It is a powerful thing when teacher education faculty, college of arts and sciences faculty, K-12 urban teachers, and administrators talk and work together as educators, and to get to know each other as human beings, in order to create innovative teacher education programs to serve urban students, schools and communities.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol Questions

1. Why did you choose to be part of the WW development work at UIndy?
2. How do you perceive and describe your...
 - relationship between self & WW?
 - experience of collaboration of SOE/CAS?
 - involvement in getting WW started?
 - role in WW development/collaboration?
3. What was the best part of collaborating on the WW development for you?
4. What was the biggest challenge to collaborating on the WW development for you?
5. What changes do you associate with the experience in the WW program and your own practice?
6. What feelings were generated by this collaborative experience?
7. What thoughts stood out for you?
8. Describe your first [last, most memorable, etc] experience w/ WW.
9. Describe your experience throughout your involvement with WW.
10. What are the biggest challenges you foresee for the WW program at UIndy?
11. What hopes do you have for the WW program at UIndy?
12. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to your experience?