

Examining the Influence of a Support Seminar on Pre-service Teachers' Preparedness for Student Teaching

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the influence of a semester-long seminar on student teachers' perceptions of their preparedness for student teaching. Eighteen pre-service teachers in elementary (grades K-6) and middle grades (grades 6–8) participated in the seminar. Seventeen pre-service teachers from the same programs were used as a matched comparison group. Analysis of gain scores between pre- and post-seminar surveys indicated that teachers in the seminar reported being more prepared than their colleagues in seven areas. Analysis of the first observation from students' full-time internship indicated statistically significant differences on ratings related to classroom management and content knowledge. However, no significant differences were noted during pre-service teachers' fourth observation during their internship. In light of these findings, implications for supporting pre-service teachers are discussed.

Introduction

Rethinking Teacher Education Practices

In the current educational climate, teacher education programs are under high levels of scrutiny to justify their impact on their graduates and student learning in PK-12 classrooms (e.g., Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Further, teacher education programs are charged to modify and reform their programs to provide further support to their teacher candidates and recent graduates from their institution (USDE, 2010). For decades (Cochran-Smith, 1991), there have been calls to reform teacher education programs, especially those semesters immediately preceding the full-time student teaching experience.

Some of these teacher education reforms include providing teacher candidates with more clinical experiences in schools (Conaway & Mitchell, 2004), teaching education courses in K-12 schools (Castle, Fox & Souder, 2006), and including deeper examinations of vignettes of teaching in college courses (Krueger, Boboc, Smaldino, Cornish & Callahan, 2004). One of the ways to support teacher candidates is through a Professional Development School partnership.

The Role of Professional Development Schools

Professional development schools (PDS) typically are collaborations of university faculty, PK-12 teachers and administrators, and teacher candidates (Holmes Group, 1990; Mantle-Bromley, 2002; National Association of Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2008). These

school-university partnerships have shown potential to impact the growth of teacher candidates and support the professional learning of K-12 faculty, university faculty, and K-12 students (Sharpe, Lounsbery, Golden & Deibler, 1999; Wait & Warren, 2001). Based on the NAPDS *Nine Essentials* document (2008), PDSs should provide a structure for teacher candidates to hone their craft before and during student teaching.

Statistical analyses have revealed that PDS candidates score significantly higher than non-PDS candidates on aspects of planning, instruction, management, and assessment (Castle et al., 2006). Conaway and Mitchell (2004) studied teacher candidates in professional development schools in the semester prior to student teaching. They found that intensive time in a PDS led teacher candidates to have more sound instructional practices and better classroom management compared to their peers. In a two-year study, researchers found that teacher candidates in a professional development school did not score statistically significantly higher during student teaching. However, in their first year of teaching, there were significant differences on measures of teacher effectiveness (Ridley, Hurwitz, Hackett & Miller, 2005).

Clearly, PDS partnerships have potential to support the professional growth of teacher candidates. This study examined the influence of a semester-long seminar for teacher candidates that occurred in the semester prior to student teaching. All participants were scheduled to student teach in a PDS.

Methodology

This study was framed by the following research questions:

- 1) What influence does a seminar for pre-service teachers have on their self-reported preparedness to teach?
- 2) What influence does a seminar for pre-service teachers have on their instruction during their internship?

Participants

Participants included a treatment group and a control group. Teacher candidates in the treatment group (n=18) were undergraduates who were either elementary or middle grades teachers and were placed at one of the six University of North Carolina-Charlotte professional development schools. The control group (n=17) were undergraduates in the same programs, but not placed at professional development school sites. Participants for the control group were purposefully selected to match the treatment group in terms of major, GPA, ethnicity and age. For example, a treatment group participant who was a Caucasian, twenty-one year old elementary education major who had a 3.75 GPA was matched with a student who had similar characteristics. In every case, matches were identical in all cases except GPA. GPAs were matched within 0.10 of each other. During the study, one control group participant dropped out of the study, leading the treatment group to have one more participant than the control group.

Context

This study examined the influence of an 8-hour seminar for teacher candidates who were in their year-long internship and preparing to start their full-time student teaching internship in one of the university's professional development schools. The PDS network at the university provides funding to schools to work with university faculty on initiatives that support practicing P-12 teachers, teacher candidates, and other educational professionals. All of the teacher candidates in both groups had not participated in any PDS projects prior to the seminar.

All elementary and middle grades education teacher candidates in the program are required to complete a year-long internship in the same classroom during their senior year. During the first semester of this internship, candidates complete their coursework and clinical activities in the school where they will student teach during their last semester. An important element of this internship is directed education-

al activities completed with the classroom teacher (the cooperating teacher or “CT”).

During the entire duration of the study participants in both groups were in their year-long internship. Further, both groups were in the same courses, in which they completed similar assignments. The only difference between groups was that the treatment group was invited to take place in an eight-hour seminar. With the format of the University’s professional development school network, the seminar was the primary PDS project with our teacher candidates, and the only difference between student teaching in a PDS compared to a non-PDS.

Seminar Description

The seminar included four two-hour meetings facilitated by two full-time faculty in the Office of Field Experiences. Both faculty supervise full-time student teachers and had planned the seminar based on their observations and feedback from student teachers’ needs from previous semesters. As stated previously, teacher candidates in the treatment group were in their first semester of their senior year. The primary topics of the seminars included classroom management, instructional planning, assessment, and an overview of the demands of the student teaching semester. The seminar format was discussion and activity-oriented, participants were given some brief information at the beginning of each meeting, and then spent the remainder of the time working on various activities, such as analyzing classroom vignettes, student work, classroom management plans, and sharing their ideas about the topics that they were exploring. Participants also had opportunities during each meeting to ask questions about things that they were noticing in their year-long semester or other questions that they had related to teaching.

Data Sources

Various data sources were used in this study. First, participants completed a survey about their preparedness for student teaching. This survey was completed at the beginning (before

the seminar) and end (after the seminar) of their year-long semester.

The research team also analyzed participants’ scores on their observations from the validated evaluation instrument called the Student Teaching Assessment Rubric ([STAR], Jaus, Cockman, Frazier & Hopper, 2007). Scores from the University Supervisors were used in this study. The instrument was developed and based on the ten national Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards. Undergraduate student teachers are observed four times, typically once during each month of student teaching.

For the STAR observations, teacher candidates’ first observations were examined. The first observation reflects teacher candidates’ performance during the first month of student teaching, which may be more sensitive to the influence of the seminar. Later observations were not included due to the fact that there is rarely a quantitative difference between student teachers, since all student teachers must earn a 3 in each area in order to graduate and be eligible for a state teaching license.

Data Analysis

The research team used statistical analyses to examine both research questions. Data were entered into a spreadsheet, and then imported into SPSS 16.0. For the first question, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the mean gain scores for each group. For the second question, two one-way ANOVAs were conducted; one using STAR scores from the first observation and one using scores STAR scores from the fourth observation.

Findings

Question One

There were statistically significant differences between groups on seven of the ten survey items (Table 1). Six of the seven items had a p-value less than 0.01 and one item had a p-value greater than 0.01 but less than 0.05. Due to the small sample size of both groups (n=19 in treatment,

Table 1: One-way ANOVA with Gain Scores from Survey

	<i>Df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Partial eta squared</i>
Creating meaningful learning experiences	1	8.739	0.006**	0.200
Supporting students' development	1	6.685	0.014**	0.160
Meeting the needs of diverse learners	1	2.400	0.130	0.064
Using effective instructional strategies	1	3.287	0.078	0.086
Designing a rich learning environment	1	4.397	0.043*	0.112
Using communication skills	1	11.865	0.002**	0.253
Planning instruction	1	8.586	0.006**	0.197
Choosing appropriate assessment strategies	1	10.161	0.003**	0.225
Reflecting on my teaching	1	8.843	0.005**	0.202
Building relationships with students	1	2.167	0.15	0.058

Note. * denotes $p < 0.05$. ** denotes $p < 0.01$.

$n=18$ in control), the effect sizes range from low to moderate for each of the survey items in which there was a statistically significant difference.

Question Two

There were statistically significant differences between groups on four of the items on the STAR rubric for the first observation (Table 2). The four items were content knowledge ($p=0.031$), establishing a positive climate ($p=0.002$), establishing expectations for behavior ($p=0.004$), and monitoring and responding to behavior ($p=0.015$).

Discussion and Implications

The seminars focused on various topics, including classroom management, organizational skills, and assessment. By participating in the seminar, teacher candidates in the treatment group reported that they felt more prepared than matched peers in seven areas related to teaching. This finding indicates that the seminar did lead to teacher candidates' self-efficacy and impacted their perceived readiness to enter their full-time internship. Prior research found that participation in PDS initiatives, such as on campus classes or PDS clinical experiences also led to improved

Table 2: One-way ANOVA for First Observation

	<i>Df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Partial eta squared</i>
Standard 1a - knowledge of content	1	5.091	0.031*	0.130
Standard 1b - implements interdisciplinary approaches	1	0.655	0.424	0.019
Standard 1c - makes content relevant to learners	1	1.719	0.199	0.048
Standard 4a - selects multiple teaching strategies	1	1.959	0.171	0.054
Standard 4b - utilizes a variety of materials and resources	1	2.278	0.140	0.063
Standard 5a - establishes and maintains a positive climate	1	11.985	0.002**	0.266
Standard 5b - establishes expectations for behavior	1	9.298	0.004**	0.220
Standard 5c - monitors and responds to student behavior	1	6.608	0.015*	0.167
Standard 5d - manages time and materials	1	3.131	0.086	0.087
Standard 7a - bases purposeful learning activities on essential skills and district curriculum	1	1.607	0.214	0.045
Standard 7b - develops short and long term planning	1	0.852	0.362	0.024
Standard 7c - monitors and adjusts lesson pace	1	2.675	0.111	0.075
Standard 9a - self-evaluates teaching and professional role	1	2.132	0.153	0.059
Standard 9b - assumes the professional role	1	0.428	0.518	0.013
Standard 9c - exhibits leadership potential within the classroom, school, and/or student teaching seminar	1	2.291	0.143	0.084

her candidates (Castle, et al, 2006; Conaway & Mitchell, 2004).

The seminars also led to statistically significant differences in four areas on the first observation with the STAR rubric. While content knowledge was not covered during the seminars, the three categories related to classroom management, establishing a positive climate, setting behavior expectations and monitoring behavior were all addressed during the seminar. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the seminar participants benefited from the seminar and effectively implemented what they had learned into the beginning of student teaching. Previous PDS initiatives have found significant differences in the instructional practices of teacher candidates in PDS efforts when compared to their peers (Castle, et al, 2006; Conaway & Mitchell, 2004; Wait & Warren, 2001).

Limitations

The small sample size is a limitation of this study. There was an empirical difference between the group that participated in the seminar and the control group; there were statistically significant differences on 7 of 10 survey items and 4 areas of candidates' first observations. However, the effect sizes were low to moderate according to Cohen's (1988) recommendations. Future studies should include larger populations of students to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation in this study was the very nature of the STAR rubric. On the four-point scale, all teacher candidates are expected to reach at least a 3, and very few students reach 4. Overall the instrument is generally not very sensitive to differences between groups on the fourth observation. Further, on the first observation, nearly every teacher candidate earns either a 1 or a 2. Researchers using observation data should use more sensitive measures to detect differences than those directly tied to teacher licensure.

Concluding Thoughts

This study found that a support seminar for teacher candidates in the semester preceding

their student teaching internship led to statistically significant differences on two measures: 7 of 10 survey items related to candidates' self-reported preparedness for student teaching, and four categories of the STAR observation protocol during their first observation of student teaching. ^{SUP}

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