Chapter 17

Multi-Semester Community Building in Higher Education: Examining the Impact on Teacher Education Candidates’ Development and Teaching Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Within the current educational context, teacher preparation programs are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness in producing teachers that impact P-12 student learning. As a result, programs must investigate organizational features that are powerful for preparing preservice candidates to enter the classroom. This research examined how the practice of having one teacher educator instruct courses over multiple semesters to the same group of students can be used to support the development of teacher candidates. This descriptive analysis presents the findings from one university teacher preparation program and what was learned about the potential for the partnership to be a powerful way to structure teacher learning. Implications are discussed as considerations for how this alternate form of organization can facilitate relationship-building, impact theory to practice connections and improve efficacy for teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

In a climate where a significant amount of attention has been directed toward measuring teacher effectiveness and the subsequent impact of teachers on student learning, there has been increased scrutiny directed toward teacher preparation programs. Acknowledging this context, there have been calls for investigations into the most powerful methods for preparing teacher candidates, with a close examination...
of the features of pathways to teaching, including where, when, and how teacher preparation is structured (e.g., Grossman & McDonald, 2008; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013). As a result, teacher education programs can no longer simply attend to individual elements within programs, but instead must now consider how various facets of programs can be comprehensively linked together to prepare their candidates to enter the classroom. This includes concurrently examining coursework, field experiences, and content as well as the overall structure of the delivery of a program to ensure candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful with 21st Century learners.

The investigation that is the focus of this chapter was conducted to examine how an organizational structure, similar to the looping that is typically associated with elementary school settings, could be used within a teacher education program. It was hypothesized that relationships built among candidates and between a teacher educator and candidates within the multi-semester experience would create a community of practice. This community would subsequently be influential for augmenting teaching candidates’ capacity to connect theory taught in coursework to practical application in classrooms as well as to improve their overall teaching self-efficacy. As such, the chapter has three objectives related to this context. First, it will establish the background on several topics relevant to the study, including characteristics of effective teacher education programs, the development of communities of practice, and building theory to practice connections between coursework and field experiences. An additional focus will be given to the examination of teaching candidates’ self-efficacy, exploring the relationship between field experiences and the construct and describing the linkages between communities of practice, field experiences, and teacher self-efficacy. The second objective is focused upon describing an investigation of a multi-semester, instructor-student partnership within a teacher education program, with a focus on building a community of practice, building connections between theory and practice, and the related impact on teaching candidates’ self-efficacy. Finally, the third objective is to use the findings of the research to describe potential implications for research in teacher education.

BACKGROUND

There is little doubt that attention toward preparing teaching candidates to enter today’s schools has grown over the last few years. Given that university-based programs enroll 88% of candidates in teacher preparation programs (United States Department of Education, 2013), the mounting criticism that asserts such programs lack of evidence of their effectiveness has drawn the attention of educators, researchers, and policy makers alike (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012). In the United States, there has been a significant focus on teacher quality and researchers have attempted to draw conclusions regarding the influence and impact of the teacher (and teacher preparation program) on student achievement and educational outcomes (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012; Henry, Kershaw, Zulli, & Smith, 2012). This idea of outcomes-based accountability, as it has been referred to, may be a reflection of a societal shift regarding the skills necessary to compete in a globalized society. Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) note that the shifts in perceived needs and related demands to produce individuals that are able to think critically, solve problems, and work collaboratively have been influential and that traditional conceptions of teaching and teacher preparation have been viewed as being insufficient to meet these demands.

Given the “unprecedented attention to teacher preparation/certification and the policies and accountability systems that govern them and measure their effectiveness” (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015, p.