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Developing Well-Prepared, Collaborative Teachers in the Rural Teacher Residency Program

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Abstract

The Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) program was a teacher preparation pathway intended to produce teachers with well-developed collaborative skills. Specific features were incorporated into the program to support the development of highly collaborative teachers. A qualitative study of the program at the conclusion of its funding cycle reveals graduates not only report collaborative skills, but also feel highly prepared to enter teaching after participation in the program. Graduates identify the cohort model, co-teaching, residency, collaboration, and action research as sources of their teacher efficacy beliefs.

Introduction

Currently, the education profession values teachers who are able to work collaboratively with one another. This trend is evident at all levels of education, but a collaborative skill set is particularly valued in elementary teachers. Teachers are expected to fight the potentially isolating structure of education, that of one teacher going into one classroom and closing the door to educate their group of students, and to be able to work with others to improve the performance of all children at their site. Given that collaborative skills are valued in teachers, it seems important to develop those skills at the pre-service level of teacher preparation.

To this end, in 2009 my institution applied for and received a Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant to design a teacher education program that would specifically train future teachers to have strong collaborative skills when they enter the teaching profession. We named this endeavor the Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) program, which was part of a broader initiative called Project Co-STARS – Collaboration for Student and Teacher Achievement in Rural Schools. This program targeted teacher candidates who wished to develop expertise in working with the most underserved student populations, populations that would require a collaborative effort on the part of teachers to successfully meet their needs.

The Rural Teacher Residency program targeted teachers wishing to work with children in rural environments as our university services a rural region in Northern California, but the training prepared teachers to work with children in any environment where an “all hands on deck”

approach is required to ensure student success (i.e., urban schools, other low-income environments, etc.). The program was designed to provide targeted training and experience in collaboration, and candidates in this program had multiple, intensive opportunities for collaboration across various aspects of the program. The purpose of this article is to briefly overview the design features implemented in the Rural Teacher Residency program as they relate to collaboration, and to extend the discussion of this program model by detailing what we learned in a qualitative evaluation of the program at the conclusion of the grant funding cycle.

Literature Review

Although the collaborative teacher is highly valued, our profession still struggles to overcome a propensity to work in isolation (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). Several practices have emerged that are causing teachers to collaborate better and more frequently.

One such practice is the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (DuFour, 2011). PLCs are a structure in which groups of teachers come together in teams to regularly examine student data and to discuss methods for improving achievement (DuFour, 2004). DuFour (2011) argues that collaboration is a critical part of what it means to be a *professional* educator and believes participation in collaboration meetings should be required, purposeful, and supported within the larger culture and systems of our schools. Further, Rigelman and Ruben (2012) argue that training in and experience with collaboration models should begin at the pre-service level if we truly expect collaboration to become the norm in our schools. Further, Cook and Friend (2010) argue that collaboration amongst professionals serving students with special needs is critical if these children are to be successful in our schools.

Response to Intervention (RtI) is another trend that has caused educators to become more collaborative. Response to Intervention is a multi-level prevention system developed to ensure that children receive high-quality instruction and intervention before being recommended for special education services (Howard, 2009). Fuchs and Fuchs (2009) further describe RtI as an approach to early intervention, as well as a method of disability identification. Although there exists variation in how schools conceptualize Response to Intervention, the RtI model has three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The primary level involves regular classroom instruction on the core curriculum and regular classroom-based approaches to differentiating instruction. The secondary level includes small group tutoring using empirically validated tutoring protocols. The tertiary level involves intensive, highly individualized instruction provided by a specialist or special educator. Fuchs and Fuchs (2009) describe RtI as “very ambitious in intent and scope” (p. 251). Because the goals of RtI are, indeed, ambitious, effective and regular communication and collaboration with other professionals at one’s school site becomes important. The implementation of RtI has necessitated greater communication and better models of collaboration between general educators and special educators, creating an even higher need for teachers to have PLCs in place.

We expect PLCs and RtI to develop collaborative skill sets in teachers, and these models are put in place to ensure collaboration regularly occurs among and between general and special educators. However, other elements of teacher education programs are being touted in the literature as having promise for improving teacher education, particularly in the area of collaboration. For example, developing strong university-school partnerships is viewed as a

method of creating a better experience for all involved (i.e., university teachers/researchers, teacher candidates, and the school staff and students) by facilitating more engagement and investment in the educational process and the community (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009).

Residency programs are considered to produce teachers who are more likely to remain in teaching, to have well-developed collaborative skills, and to be more likely to assume leadership positions in the profession (Berry, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2008). Co-teaching is another practice often reported on in the literature. Co-teaching, while often discussed in the context of improving student achievement by virtue of having another adult in a classroom, also impacts one's ability to collaborate. The time spent planning and teaching with another professional initiates a "way of being" that includes thinking together with others about how to meet student needs in the most effective ways (Friend, 2007). In addition, recent research by Perry (2016) demonstrated that co-teaching increases pre-service teachers' efficacy beliefs. Efficacy beliefs are important in teaching because they have been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as increased student learning, achievement and motivation (Bandura, 1997; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011).

Finally, Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) share that action research has been reported to develop stronger habits of reflection and analysis in teacher candidates. It also aids them in growing their skills of observation and data collection. In addition, Hubbard and Power (2012) note that action research is also very likely to encourage teachers to develop research communities, that is, groups of individuals with whom we share our discoveries and reflections around the action research process.

The Rural Teacher Residency program was designed with many of these ideas in mind. In the remainder of this article, the design features of the original program will be briefly described for the reader. Subsequently, the program elements identified by graduates and their administrators as being most important for their success will be highlighted.

Strong School Partnerships

As a first step in the development of the RTR program, faculty cultivated strong partnerships with four school districts in our region, districts serving the student populations we wished to train candidates to work with through our program. The University teacher education faculty members and K-12 teachers and administrators entered into this partnership willingly, enthusiastically, and with a shared vision of what we wanted our graduates to know and be able to do. We met together on a planning board to outline program goals and features, and to define the ways in which we would work together to prepare teachers. We believe these professional relationships were critical to the success of this project.

We were able to establish both a University and school district site clinical coordinator role. Both of these individuals (on the University side and on the district side) work with candidates in the field and work with each other to coordinate the experience for teacher candidates. These site clinical coordinator roles were an incredibly important aspect of developing a strong partnership. These individuals have primary responsibility for communicating regularly and, therefore, serve as a conduit between the University and the district.

Together we identified qualified mentor teachers in a joint University/School Site interview process. Among other qualities, mentors were selected for their ability to collaborate effectively. We then placed students in approximately equal numbers across the sites, with groups of candidates clustered together in the same school and often in the same grade level to facilitate collaborative planning and teaching efforts, as well as the completion of collaborative assignments.

One-Year Residency

In the Rural Teacher Residency program, our goal was to foster maximum collaboration between resident teachers and their mentor teachers. One way this was accomplished was through a year-long residency format. The goal of the residency model was to foster depth of understanding by placing a teacher candidate in a placement with one carefully selected mentor teacher for one entire academic year (first day of school to the last day of school). This structure provided an opportunity for the candidate to become an integral member of the class, as well as a full participant in all aspects of school life. The candidate worked with their mentor before the academic year even began as they planned, prepared, and set up the classroom for the students. Residents were in the classroom all day, four days per week (with one day per week, and some Saturdays each semester, spent on campus in coursework). Teacher candidates attended Back-to-School night, parent conferences, special school events, some staff meetings, IEPs, as well as Open House and end of year events. The sheer amount of time at the school site, coupled with the level of commitment required to be successful in a residency model, created fertile ground for high-level collaboration to occur.

Professional Learning Communities

In addition to the residency structure, we elected to work only with school districts that utilized Professional Learning Communities for regular collaboration. It was important to us to understand how PLCs were conceptualized in each district (and at the particular school sites) because we wanted to be sure that the collaboration was actually an ongoing cycle of reflection and questioning around data and overall student achievement, and not some other conceptualization of what it meant to work in PLCs. By working with districts that already had this practice in place, we were able to ensure that our candidates received a quality experience with this type of school-based collaboration. Residents spent the entire year working in these PLCs with their mentor teachers.

Co-Teaching

Another important feature of the RTR program was the use of co-teaching. Mentors who agreed to work with our program agreed to utilize co-teaching with their resident teacher. They understood that co-teaching required an attitude of shared commitment to and responsibility for student achievement, and were willing to work with their teacher candidate in this way. All teacher residents and program mentors participated together in a summer workshop in which two full days are devoted to learning about co-teaching. The resident/mentor pairs received the book *Co-Teach* by Marilyn Friend (2007), which they were expected to read as background for the workshop. They then participated in the workshop where they learned specific co-teaching strategies and how to match those strategies to appropriate content. They learned about co-planning and gained experience using co-planning models. In addition, they learned about essential communication skills required for strong collaborative relationships. They also

systematically reflected on their own work style, their style of interacting with others, as well as on possible strengths and weaknesses they might bring to a collaborative relationship. The time spent together in the summer workshop set the tone for working together throughout the academic year in a co-teaching relationship.

Collaboration between General and Special Education Candidates

Each RTR Program cohort consisted of roughly seventy-five percent Multiple Subject credential candidates and twenty-five percent Education Specialist credential Candidates. We designed the program to have these two distinct groups working side-by-side, in the same cohort and with some shared coursework, because we wanted our candidates to gain the experience in working collaboratively with one another. We wanted to establish the mindset, early on, that all teachers regularly work with one another for the good of all children. With this model of teacher education, we were able to have the Education Specialist candidates assume a consultative and collaborative role, a role we assumed they would ultimately play in the public school, while still in their pre-service training. Similarly, the Multiple Subject candidates began the practice of working together with Special Education teachers to adjust their instruction to match the needs of the children they served, and they began to see themselves as having shared responsibility for children who receive special education services.

In addition, all candidates took a key course together, Collaboration in Education, which formally dealt with the topic of collaboration between these two groups of teachers (i.e., general and special educators).

Summer Institute and Other Professional Development

During the residency year, there were multiple opportunities for collaboration with our public school partners. First, to kick off the residency, we held a one-week intensive summer institute. This institute was attended by current mentor teachers, their assigned resident teacher, University faculty (instructional faculty and field supervisors), school site faculty (district clinical site coordinator and the site administrator). During this week-long experience, we set the critically important goal of developing a strong collaborative relationship between all parties (mentors and residents, supervisors and clinical site coordinators, other University and K-12 partners). We devoted considerable time to establishing these collaborative relationships. We believe the relationship development exercises created a vitally important foundation upon which we could build our University/K-12 partnership. We spent time uncovering learning styles and preferences, as well as the individual character strengths of the group members. We delved into communication styles and methods of effective communication. We asked participants to reflect on their collaboration skill set and we developed shared understandings of what we meant by the term *collaboration*. We identified expectations for collaboration in a residency, co-teaching environment.

We used activities recommended by Bacharach and Heck (2011) from St. Cloud State University in their Co-Teaching Training materials. We also used activities from the field of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to focus participants on developing greater self-awareness and a strengths-based focus to increase their effectiveness in teaching. This workshop brought all parties together around a common purpose, building shared understandings and strong relationships in the process.

Additionally, throughout the academic year, our program hosted several professional development opportunities that brought this group together again to further develop their skills. District site coordinators polled participating mentor teachers and brought the needs to RTR Program faculty. University faculty then organized professional development days attended jointly by mentors and their residents, as well as other school members and administrators. Sometimes this professional development was provided by hired consultants, and at other times these sessions were co-presented by district and University personnel.

Action Research Projects

The Rural Teacher Residency program was a blended credential and Master of Arts degree program. The research project required for the graduate degree portion of the program was a classroom action research project. Candidates researched an authentic question that arose within their classroom practice, and they involved their mentors (and often other members of the school staff and administration) in the research process. Candidates selected research projects of real relevance at their site and this increased the collaborative relationships developed, both between the resident and their mentor (and often the broader school staff), as well as between the University faculty and school site faculty.

Mentor teachers served as an additional member of the M.A. committee, and they also attended several class sessions on the University campus with their resident to assist in the research design process. An unintended, but welcomed outcome of this level of collaboration was that several mentor teachers returned to the University to earn their M.A. degrees or other advanced certifications. In addition, as a result of involving mentors in the action research process, we had several mentor/resident pairs co-present at conferences and trainings on what they learned through the action research studies.

Program Evaluation

In late 2015 our institution received a grant to evaluate the 2010-2015 implementation of the RTR program. It is the intent of program faculty to sustain the best qualities of that program by integrating those qualities into the main program offerings in the School of Education at CSU, Chico. This additional funding was used to conduct a qualitative analysis of the program. We believed that speaking to graduates (and when feasible to their administrators) would be beneficial, and we believed this level of investigation would create a rich understanding of the program elements responsible for shaping graduates' experiences and perceived program outcomes. To this end, we planned for three waves of data collection. The first wave included conducting focus groups with a cross section of program graduates. Thirty-Five RTR program graduates (roughly one third) of the one hundred total program graduates participated in focus groups. Many of the participants attended face-to-face sessions conducted by a facilitator with extensive experience with focus groups. Those who were located out of the area joined the group via technology (e.g., Skype). These focus group sessions were transcribed (verbatim transcription) and the transcripts were subjected to a content analysis. Themes were pulled from this analysis process and were used to inform us generally, and specifically informed the second wave of data collection. In this second wave we designed a survey and administered it to all program graduates with an array of questions intended to probe the themes identified

from the focus groups. We had a 70 percent response rate to the survey. An analysis of the survey items informed our third and final wave of data collection, which consisted of classroom observations and one-on-one interviews with a selected group of program graduates and their site administrators. This final wave of data collection is nearing completion (with just a few observations and interviews remaining), which will conclude our qualitative evaluation.

Overview of Results

Teacher Efficacy

The overarching theme that emerged strongly across each data point (i.e., focus groups, surveys, and observations/interviews) was the notion that teachers exiting the RTR program felt exceedingly prepared to begin their teaching careers. This was a theme that superseded collaboration in its frequency. This theme was expressed through self-reports of feeling confident in their teaching and management of students, reports of guiding/mentoring peers perceived as less prepared to begin teaching (particularly those encountered in state-mandated teacher induction programs), reports of being sought out for their perspective on teaching practices by colleagues, being tapped for leadership roles early in their careers by administrators, etc. This theme aligns with work by Perry (2016) who uses teacher efficacy as a theoretical framework for her investigation into co-teaching. Perry determined that co-teaching was a source of teacher efficacy and indicated that further investigation into other sources of teacher efficacy would be a fruitful line of future investigation. Our faculty came to view candidates' reports of efficacy as a key theme and are inclined, as Perry (2016) suggests, to view other program elements as contributing to teacher efficacy beliefs. For example, the data suggests that the following program elements developed RTR program graduates' sense of teacher efficacy.

Program Elements Supporting the Development of Teacher Efficacy

Cohort/Support:

Our graduates describe that the cohort experience was one of the most transformative aspects of the program. While program faculty certainly intended to build collaboration into the RTR program design, we were absolutely surprised by the impact of the cohort structure. Graduates shared that the benefit of the cohort surpassed mere collaboration. They indicated that they relied upon each other for emotional support, that they tapped into varying areas of expertise within members of the group to advance their knowledge, and saw the collective as a resource that would sustain them throughout the year. They reported that the cohort developed a "no-one will be left behind" quality, and described that being "in it together" mitigated the stress of an intensive year. Graduates also mentioned the fact that the student cohort was served by a faculty cohort (the same group of professors and supervisors taught all classes in the program) and indicated that this provided additional levels of trust and support throughout the year. Candidates also referred to the strong relationships between University faculty and school site faculty and said this enhanced their feelings of being supported in the program. In addition, they mentioned that being clustered in groups at their student teaching sites further facilitated the levels of support they needed and enhanced the importance of the cohort.

Co-Teaching:

Graduates described co-teaching with a highly qualified mentor as a reason for their sense of teacher efficacy. As mentioned, Perry (2016) also found that co-teaching was an important

source of teacher efficacy and, in her study, it accounted for 15% to 20% of the variance in teacher efficacy outcomes. Not only do our candidates identify co-teaching as an important contributor to their feelings of effectiveness, they describe that the best co-teaching experiences are those with mentors with whom they had a strong relationship and good communication. Again, this information aligns with Perry (2016) who identified relationship and communication as important elements in a co-teaching model, more relevant than even classroom applications and knowledge base elements within the participants' student teaching experiences. Our candidates also report that co-planning was an important part of a successful co-teaching partnership, and graduates who reported spending time in co-planning activities consistently reported greater satisfaction with the co-teaching experience.

Residency:

Our graduates describe the residency experience, that of being present on their school campus before the academic year begins, greeting their students on the first day of school, and being present as a fully-functioning member of the school staff until the last day of school, as critical to their success. They explain that, because they are embedded in the school culture and have an extended placement, they gain basic competence with the full range of experiences that a classroom teacher encounters. They also note that the coupling of a residency calendar with the increased expectations of co-teaching contributed to their feelings of preparedness.

Collaboration:

Efforts to develop teachers with a collaborative mindset and skill set were infused into every part of the program as collaboration was a major goal of this program design. The implementation of co-teaching in the field placements was an important design feature and graduates consistently mention co-teaching as a very important factor contributing to their desire to collaborate. They also consistently identify the cohort structure as a contributor to the development of their collaboration skills. Graduates did not identify their experiences with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at their school site to be as important as faculty had predicted. Graduates reported that PLC quality varied by school (despite our attempts to control for this in our school site selection), but they shared that a strong opportunity to collaborate, even if just within a grade level team outside of the formal PLC structure, was the most valuable aspect to developing their collaboration skills. Graduates barely mentioned our attempts to foster collaboration between general and special education candidates as an important factor, leading us to believe it was not highly impactful.

Action Research:

Graduates report that having participated in conducting action research during their student teaching experience is an important source of their teacher efficacy beliefs. They reported that participating in the "official" process required to earn the Master's degree gave them confidence in their ability to use data in the classroom to inform their practice. They report embracing the process of analyzing data and identifying patterns, and indicate that they feel confident seeking out other sources of information (i.e., the research literature) to inform their decision-making. They report increased confidence in this area even if they report not having conducted action research since the conclusion of their program.

Conclusion

Although the program was designed with a primary focus on developing a collaborative teacher, our evaluation of the Rural Teacher Residency Program indicates that the design

features worked together to create a teacher who, above all else, feels prepared and effective. Graduates also describe themselves as highly collaborative and many of the program elements that had a strong impact on their ultimate feelings of preparedness are also elements that strongly drive collaborative practices (e.g., co-teaching, residency, working within a cohort, collaborative program practices, etc).

Anyone interested in learning more about the Rural Teacher Residency program, in terms of our program design, student/faculty reflection on the impact of program design elements on teacher preparedness, action research, co-teaching in our program, or simply the program in general is invited to access information we have provided online.

For example, as a part of our work, we created a set of videos demonstrating the various co-teaching strategies in action at our classrooms sites. These videos show co-teaching pairs (mentors and their residents) engaged in a teaching segment that highlights the various co-teaching strategies. The pairs also reflect on how the strategy works in their classroom and within their teaching practice. These videos are being used by various groups around the country for professional development and can be found at the following web address: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVTdAUXAQXjllxf8L28FeMW8z_BVTkxxy

We also have video material at <http://www.csuchico.edu/soe/advanced/education/rtr/> that shows teacher candidates, district partners, and University faculty reflecting on the various design elements and how those elements impact teacher preparedness. It is powerful to hear, in their own words, how this program impacted their experiences.

At <http://teachingcommons.cdl.edu/rtr/about/index.html> under the “Research Projects” tab, readers can find links to sample action research projects completed by graduates of our program. You’ll see various projects that range from very specific to broad. For example, one project details a classroom-based decision the resident made to use a retrospective miscue analysis approach to build more awareness of her struggling second grade students’ reading skills. Another resident focused more broadly when she developed a school-wide after school math program for students with math anxiety. The action research process our candidates engaged in caused them to think deeply about a question related to their teaching practice, and to collect and analyze data that would inform how they addressed the issue in their work with students.

Finally, at <http://www.csuchico.edu/soe/rise/> one can learn about another, very similar, grant-funded program being run at California State University, Chico. This program is called the Residency in Secondary Education (RiSE) and was designed in very much the same format as the Rural Teacher Residency program. The primary difference is that this program focuses on secondary (9th-12th grade) settings and residents earn their Single Subject credential. Candidates are still working in a residency, co-teaching placement in a rural school. Our institution continues to learn from this program and it will inform future work within our Single Subject program offerings.

This article updates and extends a previous paper by discussing a qualitative evaluation study of the Rural Teacher Residency Program. (Spring 2013, Developing Collaborative Teachers, Rebecca Fawns-Justeson, Ed.D., MAPP).

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