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Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

1. Purposes

This proposal describes the outcomes of a major reorganization of a well-established five semester post-baccalaureate combined credential/MA program into a three semester program. The original program focused squarely on social justice and multicultural awareness and was designed to strengthen candidates' abilities to teach students from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; reorganization was driven entirely by external forces, many of which the department faculty viewed as anathema to our larger purposes as educators, including increasingly politicized views about teacher preparation (see, for example, Apple, 2016; Cochran-Smith et al, 2016; Lewis and Young, 2013; Kaplan and Owen, 2003, Zeichner, 2013). Facing tightening budgets and the rise of for-profit and online programs offering "equivalent" degrees in much shorter time, we struggled to recruit enough teacher candidates. Thus, as a K-8 department of about 18 instructors at our large urban west coast university, we decided to shorten our program.

Our overarching goal was to prepare deeply reflective teachers with an orientation toward progressive educational ideals (see, for example, Bowers, 1987; Dewey, 2004; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2010; Noddings, 2015) a commitment to social and emotional dimensions of teaching, and meeting the needs of urban students from diverse linguistic, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds (See, for example Greene, 1995; Nieto, 1992; Watson and Ecken, 2003; Yosso, 2005). After three years of exploration, discussions, decision-making, and piloting, we graduated the first cohort of students in Spring 2016. This qualitative case study explored these questions: (1) *to what extent does the program foster the development of reflective and self-aware novice teachers?*, (2) *to what degree do students connect sociological and critical theory and progressive educational ideals to their teaching?*, and (3) *in what ways does the program encourage and support participation in communities of practice centered on multicultural awareness, critical reflection, and theory-to-practice connections?* We report outcomes that are decidedly mixed, and outline plans for further redesign.

2. Perspectives

As a faculty versed in sociological critical theory (e.g. Bowers, 1984; Giroux, 2011), we recognized that many of the currents that precipitated our need to reorganize were the very currents we are committed to resist. Zeichner (2010) explicates four such issues, all of which were at play in our context: competition, economic rationalization, increased external oversight, and attacks on diversity. Teachers are increasingly viewed dismissively as 'mere' technicians whose job is to "deliver" curriculum, and teaching itself as nothing more than mastering a collection of "best practices," tricks, and techniques for content delivery (Authors, 2013; Giroux, 2010). This view is based on a deficit-model of diversity, ignores relational aspects of teaching, and is at the heart of efforts to privatize teacher education (Apple, 2016; Leachman & Mai, 2014; Milner, 2013; Zeichner, 2010). One result has been a marked uptick in competition from weak non-university credential programs (NUCPs) with entrance standards that require nothing substantially more than "a heartbeat and a check that clears the bank" (Baines, 2006, p. 327). This is worrying, given that teachers of the poor, students of color, and English language learners are more likely to be inexperienced, not to have completed a rigorous credential program, or to be teaching outside their fields than teachers of rich, white, and

Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

native English speakers (Darling-Hammond, 2004; National Research Council, 2010). This deep tension – on one hand an unwavering commitment to teaching social justice from a sociological critical perspective and on the other the need to respond to market realities that threatened our ability to teach at all – defined our efforts.

We quickly discovered that pedagogical (e.g. Tom, 1997), and thematic (e.g. Barnes, 1987) concerns about what in our existing program was essential, what might be de-emphasized, and what could be removed entirely without too much untoward effect were the most challenging aspect of redesign. We found Darling-Hammond's (2012) framing of three major problems in teacher education helpful: (1) overcoming the apprenticeship of observation (Grossman, 1991); (2) addressing the challenge of enactment (Kennedy, 1999), and (3), addressing the problem of complexity (Jay & Johnson, 2002).

In brief, we did three things. First, we generated a relatively small collection of “touchstone texts” to infuse throughout the three semesters, returning to the list often in all of our classes. Second, we created an immersive field experience centered on co-teaching partnerships in which candidates stepped into the role of teacher from the start of their field practicum. Third, we set students immediately on the course of developing an area of interest that would lead to an action inquiry-based MA project (e.g. identifying an area of interest in the first-semester's *Sociological Foundations* course, developing a literature review in the second-semester's *Action Research Methods* course, which underpinned the culminating MA project in the final-semester's *Special Studies* course). We present a full description of the redesigned program in the full paper.

3. Mode of inquiry

In this qualitative case study, we probed the experiences of students and instructors in the reorganized program, and also elicited comparisons between the reorganized program and the original program from those participants who were familiar with both (see section 4, below). Data analysis followed Creswell's (1998) guidelines for categorical aggregation, interpretation and generalization. Thus, during initial stages of data analysis, a relatively large number of codes was developed during the reading of the artifacts themselves while simultaneously keeping information from the literature in mind, using a methodological process that Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as “partway between the a priori and inductive approach” (p. 61). Codes were then aggregated into categories, and categories were organized into themes. Once themes were identified, the data was re-examined with these themes in mind in order to make what Creswell (1998) refers to as “naturalistic generalizations.”

4. Data sources

Data consisted of a collection of student work and transcripts of semi-structured participant interviews.

Student work: student work centered on social justice from a cohort of 30 second-semester candidates and another cohort of 19 third-semester students. Work from the second-semester cohort consisted of: (1) short responses to a series of case studies and teaching dilemmas centered on the social, emotional, moral and ethical; (2) assignments from a *classroom environments* course that asked them to develop classroom ‘traditions’ based on developmental discipline approaches (Authors XXXX; Watson & Ecken, 2008);

Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

(3) teaching philosophies and theoretical frameworks from an *action research methods* course. From the third-semester cohort, we analyzed student culminating MA papers.

Semi-structured interviews: we selected six students from the second semester and six students from the third semester of the redesigned program; half because they seemed to be thriving and the other half because they seemed to be struggling. We also interviewed six instructors and three mentor teachers. We asked the following open-ended questions (worded appropriately depending on the participants' role), following up with related questions based on participant responses: (1) *In what ways does the program support critical examination of candidates' beliefs about teaching, learning, and students? In what ways does the program undermine it?* (2) *In what ways do sociological and critical theory and progressive educational ideals reveal themselves in candidates' coursework or field teaching?* (3) *What characterizes student development of and participation in reflective professional communities of practice?* We also posed versions of these questions to five former students – graduates of the original program – for purposes of comparison.

5. Results

Analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes about student experiences related to our three inquiry questions (See section 1).

Theme 1: An overly demanding workload undermined students' ability to critically self-reflect. Despite our strident efforts to cut non-essential material from our courses, students, faculty, and mentor teachers all pointed to a paucity of breathing room that undermined one of our central aims. Notably, even the candidates who seemed to be thriving reported that they often felt pressured to cut corners on assignments. "It's triage," one said. "There's too much. I wind up having to rush just to get stuff off my plate even though I know it's not great work." Students seemed especially frustrated because time pressure forestalled the depth of their work. As one student commented, Working on the *Blueprint* [Traditions assignment] instead of falling back on punishment/reward systems really helped me get at something that's hard to do, but necessary. But the problem was I wound up spending maybe too much time on that assignment. Some others.. I didn't go very deep... I just couldn't find enough hours in the day. Frustrating, because I always had this feeling, like, *'I'm gonna pay for this somewhere down the line.'*

Another student highlighted what we interpreted as an incoherence between our stated goals and the program's structure:

It was a little ironic... the emphasis on 'critical reflection' and 'examining underlying assumptions' and 'hegemony' and all that, but in the context of 'hurry up! read this article! do this lesson plan! turn in that paper! More than once, I wondered, *are they giving us too much work to teach us how to be intentional, because that's what teaching is gonna be like?* I dealt with it by just diving into some of the work, and I phoned in other stuff, but at the end maybe I started getting better at making tough choices with my eyes wide open [laughs]."

Theme 2: efforts to increase program cohesion helped students make theory-to-practice connections. Data suggest that the use of touchstone texts emphasized the centrality of a relatively small number of underpinning ideas [which we explicate in the

Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

full paper], which led students to more readily connect those ideas to their own teaching, particularly when their mentor teachers were also familiar with those texts. In such cases, students reported that planning and debriefing between candidates and their mentors often led to concrete examples of how to apply a given theory. For example, one student, referring to the Watson and Eckens (2003) text, observed,

I immediately got what Watson was talking about, or at least I thought I did. But when it came up in my (teaching practicum) in a slightly different way, I totally didn't see it! It wasn't until we (her mentor) talked about it that I realized! It's a cliché, but it there *is* a difference in theory and practice. It was great to have someone there to help me see what I thought I understood in theory but totally didn't in practice.

Theme 3: The cohort model encouraged critical self-reflection. Circumstances that disrupted cohorts diminished student experience. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to implement a strong cohort model due to challenges keeping enrollment balanced across sections. Instead, we implemented a “weak” cohort model (about 20% student mobility from class to class). Interviews from both students and instructors suggest that those who left a cohort to join another, as well as those whose cohorts were joined, suffered from a perceived lack of community that hampered depth of discussion. The explanation seems straightforward: with strong and well-functioning cohorts comes familiarity and trust. As one student said, holding up her phone during an interview, “Here’s the difference (pointing to her contact list) That’s Katie, that’s Erin, that’s Nick, that’s Allie, that’s Jessica. All these...? First semester. We actually go back and forth a lot. But Other Katie? She joined this semester. She’s not in here.”

6. Significance

We think helping new teachers reflect on *why* people teach and what their ultimate goals are is critical to their development as reflective professionals, and must be attended to explicitly. Paraphrasing Bowers, (1987), although keeping the trains running on time is important, more important is keeping an eye on where the trains are headed. This reorganization was an attempt to bring this theoretical perspective on program redesign in a constrained context. We present analyses of the systemic approaches and our program has adopted to accomplish this in the face of increasing pressures toward “efficiency.” We hope our efforts to maintain our programmatic focus on social justice in the current challenging context, as limited as they may be, may help others engaged in similar efforts.

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Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

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Teacher Education Program Redesign: Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice in an Increasingly Challenging Context

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