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Developing a Matrix to Ensure Diversity of Field-Based Experiences

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Developing a Matrix to Ensure Diversity of Field-Based Experiences in Alternative Programs

Abstract

Requiring field-based experiences in diverse settings is a special challenge in alternative programs. A matrix developed to ensure diversity of field-based experiences enhances the preparation and sustenance of quality professionals.

Section I: Content

Statement of the problem

Requiring field-based experiences in diverse settings, an essential element for teacher preparation, is a special challenge in nontraditional alternative programs. Unlike traditional college students who may have greater freedom to do field work in a variety of settings, practicing teachers may have less experience in classrooms other than their own and mid-career professionals may have conflicts with full-time work schedules.

Literature review

Traditional undergraduate teacher candidates who enter college immediately following high school graduation have minimal, if any, teaching experience or other work experience. In contrast, teacher candidates enrolled in graduate education programs represent a greater continuum of individual differences in terms of the breadth and depth of their teaching and work experiences. Individuals pursuing initial teacher licensure through a graduate program include candidates in their early twenties who recently completed an undergraduate major in a content field, with life experiences that resemble their undergraduate peers; mothers of older children who are returning to the work force; mid-career professionals who begin teacher preparation coursework while continuing their career, as well as career-switchers who have already left their previous employment and are currently receiving on-the-job training in the classroom; and others who have years of classroom experience or “quasi-apprenticeship” in the roles of substitute teachers, part-time teachers, or teacher’s aides. Individuals pursuing administration, or other advanced licensure, range from those who recently completed initial teacher licensure, with student teaching as their primary classroom experience, to those who have been classroom teachers for decades. While undergraduate teacher preparation programs typically include a continuum of field experiences, “well thought out induction support is even more crucial than for traditional route teachers” (Nakai & Turley, 2003, p. 532). “The fundamental differences between an alternative and traditional program are the target audience, the training design, and the length of training, not the program content, rigor or expected outcomes” (AACTE, 1999).

The development of multicultural competence and commitment is one of the expected outcomes for candidates in teacher education programs (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004). “The increasingly diverse student population in our nation’s schools calls for teachers who are interested and prepared to teach students with varied backgrounds, instructional needs and abilities (Ward & Ward, 2003, p. 532). The disparity between teacher candidates who are predominantly white, middle-class females and the diverse K-12 student population is also a matter of concern (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004; Proctor, Rentz & Jackson, 2001). Field-

based experiences provide authenticity and exposure to the wisdom and passion of field-based educators (Goodfellow & Sumsion, 2000). “Just providing knowledge about the characteristics of different cultures is not effective” (Proctor, Rentz & Jackson, 2001, p. 220). Best practices for preparing teachers for diverse classrooms require carefully-planned diversity of field-based experiences and the opportunities to share and reflect on those experiences (Proctor, Rentz & Jackson, 2001; Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004). Although candidates who are teaching concurrently with professional coursework will encounter increased opportunities for immediate application of their learning and will enrich methods course discussions, they may have less opportunity for experiences in classrooms other than their own and they may be resistant to exploratory, reflective practice (Nakai & Turley, 2003).

Contribution

Experience in diverse settings is a means of improving the competence and retention of beginning teachers, thus “Preparing Quality Professionals and Sustaining Them.” Ensuring diverse experiences presents a special challenge for nontraditional alternative programs.

Relevance

Matrices designed to ensure diversity of field-based experiences may result in successful exemplary practices for nontraditional alternative programs. Exit data is aggregated to determine the types of experiences fulfilled and initial matrix submissions are analyzed to determine the experiences with which practicing teachers, career switchers, and other candidates enter the program. Data gathered using the matrices reveals patterns of current practice and potential growth, which provides implications for program policy.

Conclusions

Field Experience Matrices are a useful tool in communicating program expectations and documenting candidates’ professional growth. Implementation of a required matrix of experiences affords candidates experiences in diverse settings such that each has working knowledge of the needs and challenges that are common in each setting. Further, practicing teachers develop a better understanding of the general student population and broaden their perspectives of the needs of learners in cultures other than that in which they teach. The matrices can be adapted for undergraduate programs and other settings.

Section II: Outcomes and Methods

Learner/participant outcomes

At the end of this session, participants will

- Analyze content and design of the Field Experience Matrices
- Interpret aggregate data for the Field Experience Matrices
- Generalize matrix concepts for applications in other settings

Methods

The presenters will provide a brief introduction to the Field Experience Matrices, including:

- Statement of the problem: The requirement of field-based experiences in diverse settings is a special challenge in nontraditional alternative programs.

- Rationale for the solution: Field Experience Matrices must reflect the mission of the unit, the expected outcomes for specific endorsement areas, and the unique experiences of the individual candidate.
- Implementation of the instrument: Field Experience Matrices are implemented and tracked for initial and advanced licensure programs. Students self report progress at each of four gates in the program process (admissions, candidacy, internship application, exit)

Following the introduction, roundtable participants will examine and discuss:

- Field Experience Matrices for specific endorsement areas
- Sample completed matrices and candidate reflections
- Aggregated data for Field Experience Matrices

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