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Elementary Education & Reading

Effective Instructional Supports for African American and Latina Teacher Candidates

Project Description:

Census data indicates that the P-12 student population is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, especially in urban areas. More than four out of ten students in P-12 schools today are students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a). By 2020, they are projected to be approximately half of the elementary and secondary population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). However, the teaching force is 87% European American, 8% African American, and 3% Latino (National Education Association, 1992).

These demographic trends suggest the need for a greater number of minority teachers. There is growing evidence that a higher number of teachers of color in a school – particularly African American and Latino – can promote the achievement of African American and Latino students (Clewall, Puma, & McKay, 2001; Dee, 2000). Moreover, teachers from under represented groups serve as role models for students from these same groups (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1997; Clewell & Villegas, 1998). They are likely to provide more culturally relevant instruction (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as well as offer alternate perspectives on appropriate and effective practices for all students (Banks, 1993).

Due to the large majority of European American teacher candidates, most research in this area has focused on how to prepare this group for urban teaching (del Prado Hill, Friedland, & Phelps, under review). This project examines ways to retain and support those African American and Latino/a college students who have chosen to enter the teaching profession.

Within the childhood education program at our institution, out of 698 total undergraduates, only 53 identified themselves as African American (7.6%) and 19 identified themselves as Latino/a (2.7%) as of spring 2009, even though our institution resides in a city in which almost 40% of the population is African American and 7.4 % of the population is Latino/a (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). For candidates in the program, the methods courses are central to their professional development. These courses with corresponding field experiences are where candidates move between theory and practice through the process of reflection to develop into teachers ready for certification. Of particular importance is the six-credit literacy methods block because of its status as the first methods course candidates take once they have been accepted into the major. Candidates are unable to move on in the program if they do not successfully meet the requirements of this course. Moreover, the social studies methods course is significant because it is the way our majors meet their college-wide diversity requirement. Through this course candidates have opportunities to address issues related to effective practices for diverse classrooms. In addition, a common assignment across all sections of the course is an extensive and reflective paper that asks candidates to consider the role of their own background in teaching diverse groups of students and to develop an action plan for doing so. Because of the crucial role

played by these two courses I seek to better understand the ways in which the courses meet (and do not meet) the needs of our candidates. In particular, I am interested in the ways African American and Latino/a candidates experience these courses in order to develop systems of support to increase the number of African American and Latino/a teachers graduating from our program.

This project uses the scholarship of teaching and learning framework (Bain, 2004; Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 1993) while also benefiting from undergraduate research. To better understand how teacher candidates experience the instructional practices of the methods courses described above, I believe the student voice is important as both subject of the research and author of the research. The faculty researcher (who is Latina) has taught both courses for four semesters since fall 2007. She interviewed the two other instructors who teach the combined courses to learn more about their instructional practices specific to the African American and Latino/a candidates in their courses. The student researcher (who is African American) was enrolled in both courses with a corresponding field placement in fall 2007, and she interviewed those candidates who preferred to be interviewed by a fellow student (following the submission of grades for the semester in which they were enrolled in the courses). I believe that the student researcher brings great value to the project. As an African American candidate she has helped to identify areas of concern that were overlooked by the instructor. Moreover, other students in the courses seemed to appreciate being offered the choice of interviewer.

Research Questions:

- What instructional activities (course activities, assignments, readings, student-teacher interactions, student-student interactions, and field experiences) support African American and Latino/a undergraduates in their goal to become certified childhood teachers?
- What instructional supports are likely to help African American and Latino/a teacher candidates when they face challenges in the program?

Original Data Gathering Plan:

1. Interview a selected sample of twelve African American teacher candidates who had completed the Elementary Education & Reading (EER) Department's gate-keeping nine credit literacy and social studies methods block with a corresponding field placement during 2007-2008. (These twelve teacher candidates would include several who had not passed one or more course within the program.)
2. Interview the three EER instructors who teach the nine-credit block (including the author of this study).
3. Conduct a content analysis of a common assignment addressing the role of diversity in a developing teacher's life

Modified Data Gathering and Analysis Plan:

1. Unexpectedly three Latina teacher candidates enrolled in my course during the fall 2008 semester. Moreover, my sections have drawn a disproportionate number of African American and Latino/a candidates relative to the program as a whole. (Out of 57 total students over four semesters, nine are African American and three are Latina representing

21% of the total.) Of this total of twelve teacher candidates, three were required to repeat courses in the EER program prior to enrolling in my course. With the approval of the CASTL Director, I adjusted the data gathering plan to include both African American and Latina teacher candidates and extend the data gathering period to include teacher candidates from four semesters. This allowed me to examine the experiences of two under represented groups in the EER program and provided consistency to the study because all participants shared the same experience of the same instructor and field placement site.

2. Although, the interviews with the course instructors and the content analysis of the common assignment were useful, I plan to use these two data sets for contextual information rather than as a focus of the study. The interviews have proven to be the most helpful in addressing the questions raised above.

Findings:

There was a large degree of variation in teacher candidates' experiences in the program as well as the influence of their own background that they brought to the program; however, several important themes emerged from the study:

Isolation – Due to their small numbers within the education program, African American candidates reported a sense of isolation in their coursework. They often found themselves as the only student of color in a course. In addition, because the methods courses emphasize the use of cooperative learning, students of color were often the only student of color within the smaller groupings as well. The field experience for the methods courses studied is located in a school with a student body that is approximately 98% African American. Moreover, the principal, vice principal and many teachers in the school are African American. All nine of the African American teacher candidates discussed the importance of this placement in reducing their feelings of isolation once we began meeting at the school site.

Interestingly, the three Latinas in the study did not experience this same feeling of isolation within their coursework, although each commented on the fact that they were often the only Latino/a in a class. One possible explanation is that all three completed their 30 hour concentration in Spanish which seems to have served as a system of support for these teacher candidates.

Issues of Respect – Discussion of what constitutes respectful behavior between instructor and student and among students was expressed through a cultural lens in the interviews. The African American and Latina candidates expressed a criticism of professors and instructional practices that seemed too relaxed as well as a desire for professors to be clear about the authority that they hold. For example, I began the first semester (fall 2007) by inviting teacher candidates to use my first name when addressing me. During the interviews, the teacher candidates enrolled in the methods courses that semester discussed how uncomfortable this made them feel because they believed I created a confusion over my status in our classroom. In addition, gender seemed an important factor in definitions of respect. In those sections where there was a greater proportion of men (an underrepresented group in childhood education), there were more concerns about the lack of respect.

Addressing Standard English – The issue of Standard English raised a dual concern for the participants. First, the teacher candidates were very uncomfortable by the negative view many European American candidates held of the Black Vernacular used among students in the field placement and second, they discussed the anxiety they felt about their own use of Standard English, particularly in their writing and speaking. All three Latina candidates had attended bilingual programs in Buffalo as P-12 students, and they felt they were not well prepared for college, particularly in the area of writing. As a result, they felt they had to work very hard to learn to write (and speak) “professional English.”

Examining One’s Own Bias – The participants commented on the importance of the common reflective assignment as a way to examine the role of a variety of differences in their life. By exploring not only race/ethnicity, they saw the impact of other forms of difference such as religion, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. As one participant commented, “I didn’t think that I could be biased as a Black woman, but the assignment helped me see that I do hold biases about certain kinds of differences.”

Personal Lives – Both instructors and candidates discussed the influence of personal lives on the success (and failure) to meet the course requirements. For all of the candidates involved in the study, there have been numerous family responsibilities, financial struggles, and issues related to being a first generation college student that led to attendance difficulties and difficulties meeting deadlines. Several candidates were required to redo the courses as a result. One candidate noted, “The challenges on the outside of school make it very difficult to meet the challenges on the inside.”

Preliminary Suggestions: To address these many challenges, participants offered the following suggestions: (1) Identify African American and Latino/a teacher candidates who have successfully completed the program who can serve as mentors for those African American and Latino/a candidates beginning their methods courses, (2) Clarify expectations for respect and explore the cultural differences related to what constitutes respect and authority, (3) Discuss the politics related to Standard English and acknowledge the legitimacy of Black Vernacular as a language. Help all candidates understand the importance of students’ home language for their identity and school success. Provide non-judgmental feedback on candidates’ written work through the use of multiple drafts and opportunities to practice public speaking within the college classroom prior to teaching in the field placement site, (4) Continue to use the common reflective assignment as a means to explore the role of difference in teachers’ lives. Perhaps use this space as a way to explore issues related to Standard English, (5) Continue to provide opportunities for field placements in sites where the leadership and teachers are African American or Latino. (6) Explore ways that the 30 hour concentration might serve as a system of support. (7) All participants discussed the need for instructors to demonstrate a pedagogy of caring. Participants talked about wanting instructors to reach out to their students and also acknowledge accomplishments. Rather than emphasizing how difficult the courses will be, the candidates wanted their instructors to inspire them to see the larger purposes behind the courses and help them believe they are capable of success in the field of teaching.

From my perspective as the instructor of the course, this project has been valuable for the opportunity to apply the scholarship of teaching and learning framework to my own teaching while also including the role of student research. The tools of systematic data gathering and analysis offered by the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as the opportunity to have a

student researcher interrogate my teaching processes have led to important changes in my practice.

Contributions of the Project:

Presentations made:

- Buffalo State College Student Research & Creativity Celebration, May 2009 (by Felicia Scott)
- American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, April 2009 (by P. del Prado Hill)
- Buffalo State College Scholarship & Creativity Symposium, October 2008 (by P. del Prado Hill)
- Buffalo State College Professional Development Consortium Retreat, September 2008 (by P. del Prado Hill and F. Scott)

Plan for summer 2009:

- Data has been gathered from the twelve teacher candidates and the three instructors. The final interviews are being transcribed. Following this transcription process, I will conduct another round of analysis of the interviews and common assignment to write a paper with student researcher Felicia Scott to submit to the *Harvard Educational Review*.

Ideas for fall 2009:

- The EER Department has begun using a portion of its faculty meeting time to present projects of interest to the faculty. The EER Chair has scheduled me to present the findings of this project at our first meeting on September 11, 2009.
- Dr. Kevin Miller, Chair of Exceptional Education, learned of the project during the Student Research & Creativity Celebration in May and is interested in working across our two departments to develop a mentoring program for teacher candidates from underrepresented groups. Dr. Miller, Dr. Kathy Wood (CEURE Director), and I will meet over the summer to begin discussing ideas.

Professional benefits:

- Exposure to the scholarship of teaching and learning framework (books, articles, and I attended a session on this topic at the 2009 AERA Annual Conference).
- Exposure to the value of student research in connection with the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- Participation in the CASTL Advisory Board to learn how colleagues of various departments use the scholarship of teaching and learning within their fields.
- I have been interested in the topic of recruiting and supporting teacher candidates from underrepresented groups for many years. This project has given me a chance to approach the topic through a new lens and also to make a personal connection to the topic through my own teaching.

Many thanks to CASTL for the opportunity to conduct this study as well as the on-going support I received during the process.

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