Job-Embedded Graduate Education for Teachers: Working Intensively in High Needs Schools

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Abstract: The researchers in this study analyzed the self-identified leadership skills and key indicators of leadership as revealed by the written narratives of a group of teacher leaders. These teachers are graduates of a job-embedded, on-site degree program that uniquely combines collaborative professional development and school reform.

Within the continuum of teacher development, graduate degrees offer teachers the opportunity to study pedagogy, deepen content knowledge, and/or explore new certification areas. Traditionally, coursework is a solitary endeavor; teachers pursue this education alone on their own time. Courses and assignments are designed to deepen individual understanding, and, at best, are useful to each student in his or her context. In these programs, instructors design courses for an imaginary, typical student without specific knowledge of the professional context of the student. Teachers in these courses must make connections between their graduate coursework and their professional lives independently. Additionally, instructors rarely know if new knowledge and strategies are applied in the classroom, or if students merely complete assignments as academic exercises (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

This session describes a graduate program that is directly embedded in the daily lives of teachers. The associated university faculty connect to the schools where their graduate students teach. The graduate students are in cohorts with other teachers in their district; they collaborate and support each other in making connections between their coursework and their practice. Course assignments are explicitly tailored to the contexts of teachers who apply what they are learning in their classrooms and at their schools. In addition, assignments are connected to current school reform initiatives and those assignments embed teacher learning research into strategies and initiatives at the school and in the district.

A college of education in a major southeastern university has pioneered this program as a component of school reform strategies in partner schools around the state. Begun in 2006, this endeavor is one of the first of its type in the nation with an initial set of graduates from two school districts completing the eight semester degree program in 2008. The degree program is organized around three major goals: to develop teachers as leaders, researchers, and pedagogical experts. In this study, a research team analyzed portfolios and teacher and principal interviews to discover the perceived impact of the program on student (child) learning, teacher knowledge and practice, and school improvement.

In this paper, university faculty who provide this "job embedded" graduate program describe the program and the operational definition of "job-embedded." Further they discuss the impact of this program on teacher knowledge, student learning, and school improvement. Because there is little available research on the impact of job-embedded graduate programs on practice and student learning and because this graduate program is viewed as a school reform strategy in the college's partner schools, the study is situated within the literature on school reform and professional learning communities, constructs that provide the philosophical and

theoretical foundation of this program. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the impact of the TLSI graduate program on the development of teachers as leaders within their schools.

Theoretical Perspective

A major flaw of current school reform strategies is that they are often based on individualized assumptions rather than systems approach (Fullan, 2003). While professional development might be necessary to increase the knowledge and skills of individual teachers, reform efforts fall short if they neglect to focus efforts on improving the context in which teachers and students learn. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are increasingly viewed as an essential way to organize schools in an attempt to both maximize professional development and foster school reform (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Louis & Marks, 1998). In support of this, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) have argued that the professional development potential of PLCs can move teachers beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and skills toward helping them to rethink and reinvent their teaching practices. This prospective benefit of a PLC is rooted in the notion that its essential characteristics – shared values and norms, a clear and consistent focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatizing teaching practices, and a focus on collaboration – create a fundamental paradigm shift in the existing institutional structures of schools (DuFour, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Newman and Associates, 1996).

When professional learning communities are embedded within what teachers are already doing and they become the structure for professional development, teachers can customize their learning to reflect the context and the curriculum of the given school environment in which they operate daily (Sparks, 1997; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; St. John, Ward, & Laine, 1999; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Ultimately, this has the potential not only to change teaching practices but to influence student learning positively (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Louis & Marks, 1998).

Teachers in the program learn and practice the leadership skills necessary to facilitate effective PLCs (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Early in their graduate education, they lead their school colleagues in teacher inquiry, lesson study, and analysis of student data. Further, in assignments they continuously reflect on the performance and effectiveness both of their facilitation and of the PLCs they coach.

Context

This study was done in a large Research I university. The program was designed in partnership with an endowed center (hereafter referred to as the Center) in the College of Education. The mission of the Center is to work in under-resourced schools and communities serving linguistically and culturally diverse children. Since 2005, the Center has worked in elementary schools in multiple districts. For this session, researchers have studied the performance of their graduates in two communities: one a rural, migrant farming community and the other a major city. This job-embedded graduate program was implemented as one of multiple reform strategies in nine struggling schools with the ultimate goal of improved student and teacher learning. All partner schools are Title I with 90% language minority students, high teacher turnover, and a history of low achievement.

Teachers in the Center partner schools are eligible to earn a master's or educational specialist degree in Teacher Leadership for School Improvement (TLSI). Research-based and grounded in the context and practice of teaching, the program is organized around leadership, teacher research, and pedagogical expertise. Teachers become leaders as they learn to facilitate PLCs, advocate for students, and conduct inquiry into their own practice. Additionally, teachers

apply and demonstrate mastery of the core elements of powerful instruction as evidenced by measurable improvements in student achievement.

A unique feature of the TLSI program is the professor in residence. Each district has one or more designated university faculty members who work in partner schools with teachers and with the school leadership teams. Teachers enroll in online courses developed by university faculty and they meet bimonthly with their professor in residence to work intensively on course content.

The TLSI program differs from a traditional graduate program in its structure, environment, and success measures. While a traditional graduate program is usually campus-based with field experiences separate from coursework, the TLSI program utilizes blended delivery and is job-embedded to link coursework to classrooms. Unlike traditional programs that often foster individual competition, the TLSI program encourages a collaborative learning environment (Schmoker, 2004) with extensive peer coaching, modeling, and examination of student work. Lastly, the measure of success and intended outcomes of a typical graduate program is earning a degree and/or state certification. This program increases student achievement, builds faculty effectiveness, retains teachers, develops professional learning communities and improves school culture in service of the goal of school reform (Fullan, 2006).

Method

The sample consisted of 25 participants from 9 schools who completed the requirements for their master's or educational specialist degree in 2008. The data collected consisted of: self-reported reflections, portfolios, and interviews. Teachers throughout the duration of the course work were prompted through guided questions to reflect on the job-embedded program's impact on their pedagogical practices. These self-reported reflections also served to heighten the awareness of the teacher's professional growth.

As part of the program requirements, participants produce an extensive portfolio focused on the synthesis of their classroom and educational experiences documenting their emerging expertise in the areas of teaching, research, and teacher leadership. The materials included in the portfolio provide a reflective look at the change process experienced by each participating teacher as they completed the graduate program.

The researchers also interviewed 16 of the graduates to provide clarification and further data regarding experiences and perceptions of changes in pedagogical practices. In order to yield diverse stories that are typical of the teachers who enter the program and to provide the researchers with a range of experiences we purposely selected individuals who would provide "information-rich cases" (Glesne, 1999, p. 29). To triangulate teacher perceptions with external data, researchers interviewed three principals in schools with large cohorts of TLSI graduates. The purpose of these interviews was to determine perception of school administrators related to impact of the TLSI graduate program on teachers and school culture.

Inductive analysis was used to search for patterns and or trends. In addition researchers examine the larger impact of the TLSI graduate program on the schools where these teachers work.

Results

Preliminary analysis found evidence of substantial growth in the following areas:
- Leadership: Teachers in the TLSI program developed as leaders in school reform efforts. Principals and teachers report increased teacher leadership as a direct result of teacher participation in this program, as well as from trainings and support from the Center

related to school reform efforts. The professor-in-residence was critical in identifying emerging teacher leaders and finding opportunities to exercise that leadership.

- Educational Research/Inquiry: As a result of this program, teachers have adopted an inquiry stance in their professional lives. Portfolios highlight multiple examples of teacher research; principals report the increased use of inquiry to examine individual teacher practice as a form of teacher professional development; and teachers report migration of inquiry use to peers not in the program.
- Pedagogical Expertise: Teachers report educating peers about content areas they have studied. They provide extensive evidence of PD sessions on differentiated instruction, cross-cultural communication, backward design of units, and educational technology. Principals recognize this expertise, and increasingly call on graduates for assistance with school-wide PD.

Furthermore, graduates of this job-embedded program report that the following programmatic structures were essential in furthering their learning:

- Regular face-to-face meetings to complement online learning,
- Professor in residence to connect graduate learning to school-wide initiatives and reform strategies,
- Course sequence beginning with teacher inquiry and ending with teacher leadership,
- Expectation for collaboration among teachers in the graduate program,
- Assignments purposefully linked to ongoing school-based initiatives and programs,
- Portfolio development courses to encourage reflection and connection,
- In-class analysis of school data collected by the Center as part of overall reform initiatives that formed part of course assignments.

Educational Significance

Graduate program designers and faculty members hope that the knowledge and skills taught in their programs have impact beyond the creation of a well-designed course project. This study provides evidence not only of the application of knowledge and skills learned in a job-embedded program, but also in the development of leadership capacity in the schools with a cohort of graduate students. The TLSI graduate program is a catalyst for school change that goes beyond individual gain to a shared focus on the learning of all children and improving the practice of all teachers in a school. Although the focus is on teacher quality, student achievement is the ultimate goal of any high quality graduate program. As outlined here, teachers and principals clearly see the benefits of this job-embedded program for themselves, their peers, their students, and their schools as a whole.

As a caveat, the program studied is expensive: job-embedded structures have high costs especially when situated within larger school reform strategies. However, every PD experience carries costs, and if positive outcomes can be defined clearly in terms of improvements in student learning and teacher practice, the costs can be weighed in terms of benefits. In this study we examine the program benefits. Future studies should examine the costs of such programs as well as long term impact on student achievement on high stakes tests and other measures of student performance. Districts around the country are searching for systemic approaches to comprehensive reform. Job-embedded graduate programs are one way that universities can respond; by designing programs integrally connected to the contexts of teachers, the application of theory into practice can be realized simultaneously with a focus on whole school improvement.

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