

Defining the Model for Urban Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

The School of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City is addressing the urban teacher retention challenge through its Institute for Urban Education (IUE). IUE focuses on recruiting individuals from underrepresented populations who have a commitment to their urban communities. Its curriculum is distinguished by five features: (1) an emphasis on math, science, and literacy; (2) a focus on social justice, multicultural education, and culturally-responsive pedagogy; (3) summer, community-based experiences; (4) classes taught in urban school classrooms; and (5) new-teacher mentoring and induction.

Attending college is not possible for tens of thousands of young Americans because they are not academically qualified or they drop out of high school before graduation. Many factors—both in the schools and in the lives of students—contribute to this access challenge, not the least of which is the quality of the teachers in many of our high-poverty urban schools. The challenges faced by many of these urban schools—fewer resources, poorer working conditions, and especially less-qualified teachers than their suburban peers—are often cited as cause for the achievement gap between poor students and students of color and the majority of white students in the United States (Bracey 2002; Haycock 2001; Nieto 2003).

Studies show that by the end of high school, white students are four grade levels ahead of African American and Latino students in the areas of math and reading (Hendrie 2004; Scherer 2003). A primary reason for this disparity, many researchers believe, is teacher effectiveness. The Education Trust reports that three years of effective teaching has an enormous effect on student achievement, up to a fifty percentile point gain (Haycock 2003). Marks determined that “teachers are clearly the most important factor affecting student achievement” (2000, 17).

Teacher turnover also has a direct impact on teacher quality, and it is in regard to the retention of qualified teachers that urban schools particularly suffer. In urban districts (those districts serving low-income and high-minority populations), the five-year attrition rate is nearly fifty percent (Nieto 2003; Saffold 2003; Voke 2003)—higher than that of any other profession. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future report, “No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America’s Future,” states that “teacher retention has become a national crisis” (2003, 3).

IUE – The Kansas City Response to Teacher Retention

In 2004, The University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) School of Education responded to the challenge of urban teacher effectiveness and teacher attrition by working with the urban school district in its own backyard. The unacceptably high three-year attrition rate of fifty percent of beginning teachers in the Kansas City, Missouri, School District mirrors the national statistics. Student achievement, as in urban schools across the country, is well below standards for proficiency in the areas of math, reading, and science (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2004). Partnering with Kansas City's three largest urban school districts, UMKC and the School of Education created the Institute for Urban Education (IUE) in 2005 to recruit and equip highly qualified, diverse teachers, able to thrive in urban schools. The IUE was developed by an interdisciplinary team of UMKC faculty and representatives from the partner school districts and is based on extensive engagement with community leaders.

This four-year undergraduate program, while in alignment with state and national accreditation standards, also incorporates best practices in *urban* teacher preparation and addresses local needs and desires of the Kansas City community as well. The program is distinctive in its focus on recruitment and admission of highly qualified teacher education candidates, a field-based curriculum with strong pedagogical and content infusion, the involvement of the community as vital partners, and competency-based exit requirements that ensure teachers are fully equipped to be successful in urban classrooms.

IUE Recruitment

The typical American teacher education candidate comes from a white, middle-class monolingual background while the population of urban schools is culturally, linguistically, ethnically, racially, and economically diverse (Ladson-Billings 2001, 2005; Weiner 1999). Not surprisingly, research indicates that teachers most successful and most likely to stay in urban schools are those from urban communities (Sarafoglu 1997).

The recruitment efforts for IUE concentrate on underrepresented populations, those students who grew up and live in an urban setting and who have made a commitment to work with that community. Recruitment efforts, therefore, focus largely on high schools within the three urban partner districts. IUE faculty works with central office staff, high school principals and counselors, community college counselors, and community agencies to identify and recruit outstanding teacher candidates from those urban communities. Incentives for those to enter the program include small class sizes, on-campus housing, a cohort model, academic supports, and intense faculty-student interaction. Additionally, scholarships covering tuition, fees, and a stipend for books as well as a minimum of one-year room and board are extended to all IUE students who agree to teach in one of three urban partner districts for at least four years upon graduation. Scholarship resources are secured from university, private dollars, and grant funds.

Multicultural Curriculum

By 2010, researchers expect four of every ten students in American schools to be students of color. Therefore, “diversity issues should be central not peripheral to the rest of the curriculum, mandatory rather than optional for all prospective teachers, and infused throughout all courses and fieldwork experiences rather than contained in a single course” (Cochran-Smith 2004, 31). Infusing diversity into teacher preparation programs requires that teacher candidates first understand their own values and backgrounds, know the culture of the urban school community, and have opportunities to work with urban students and practice culturally-responsive pedagogy (Cochran-Smith 2004; Gay 2004; Haberman 2000; Smith 2003). The IUE has incorporated these attributes throughout the four-year program with social justice and multicultural education being infused through both general education and professional education courses.

Candidates in the IUE are organized into “communities of practice” in which they are part of a learning community of teacher candidates who remain a cohort throughout both the undergraduate and complementary induction program. Each cohort is led by a clinical faculty member who provides ongoing support, mentoring, feedback, and guidance to the candidates. Weekly meetings with this faculty mentor in an urban education seminar assist candidates in thinking critically about themselves, issues of diversity and social justice, and what it means to teach in urban schools.

To ensure candidates are equipped to be exemplary urban teachers, the IUE curriculum consists of five unique and defining features:

1. ***Emphasis on math, science, and literacy content and pedagogy.*** Because urban students nationally lag in achievement in these areas, students in the IUE take math and/or science content courses almost every semester of the program, many as co-requisites to teaching methods courses.
2. ***Focus on social justice, multicultural education, and culturally responsive pedagogy.*** The curriculum of the IUE emphasizes cultural awareness, culturally-relevant pedagogy, and immersion in urban schools. Students also are involved in field experiences in urban schools and communities from the very beginning of the four-year program. These field experiences are closely aligned with coursework allowing students to partner with faculty in examining the political and social nature of teaching as well as the obvious academic dimensions of their study. Immersion in urban schools helps IUE students understand the culture of urban schools and realities of urban life as well as how to connect pedagogy to the lives of their students.
3. ***Summer cultural experiences working in the community.*** Designed with community leaders, the summer cultural experience is a six-week intensive program where students work with a variety of service and nonprofit agencies to explore urban communities and provide service to the community.
4. ***Innovative classes taught in urban school classrooms.*** The IUE provides field experiences within urban schools beginning the first semester of the freshman year. Again, these experiences are coupled with coursework, allowing the teacher candidate to continually “move abstract learning into practical experiences” (Gay 2004, 85).

5. *New teacher mentoring and induction.* IUE currently is working with its partner school districts to provide a structured three-year mentoring and/or induction program with university support, supervision, and opportunities for professional growth to IUE graduates after they have taken a teaching position. Teachers will meet weekly with their communities of practice and UMKC team leaders. In addition, other IUE faculty will visit teachers' classrooms on a weekly basis to provide feedback, teaching support, and formal coursework.

Results Thus Far

The Institute for Urban Education is currently in its fourth year of implementation. From eleven students in its inaugural class, it has grown to serve fifty-six students (65 percent of whom are students of color) with plans for expansion to 140 prospective teachers. All faculty teaching professional education courses for IUE students have urban teaching experience and half are faculty of color. School district administrators are involved in the selection of teachers and alignment of experiences to coursework, and, importantly in a partnership relationship, IUE uses master teachers from the districts as adjunct professors.

At the request of the partner school districts, the IUE began with the implementation of an elementary certification program. A middle school math program was implemented in the fall of 2006 and in the fall of 2007 a middle school science program was launched. Graduates of the IUE are eligible for certification in both Missouri and Kansas.

Preliminary data suggests that the IUE is being successful in meeting its initial implementation goals. Partnerships with the community continue to grow, applicant pools have increased annually over the first three years, and IUE students are both performing well academically and have reported high levels of satisfaction with their coursework and campus life. Students within the IUE must maintain a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 to retain their scholarship. Winter 2007 data report the average IUE student GPA as a 3.32. According to a campus satisfaction survey, on a six-point scale IUE students rated their overall level of satisfaction at 5.45—reporting higher levels of satisfaction than other UMKC students on fifty-eight out of eighty-three items. Consequently, the persistence rate for IUE students is currently 88.8 percent.

The IUE also faces several challenges, including the ongoing task of acquiring the necessary funding for clinical and research faculty as well as scholarship assistance for students. The amount of available scholarship funding directly impacts the size and scope of growth for the program.

The needs within the Kansas City urban schools are great. At full capacity, the program will supply only about a quarter of the demand for effective and committed teachers for urban schools, as 2007 data showed that the three partner districts had six hundred new hires. With the lessons of the IUE as a guide, however, the School of

Education at UMKC continues to renew and refine its other teacher education programs at all levels (early childhood, elementary, middle school and secondary). The School of Education, the Institute for Urban Education, and the university at large are committed to the future of Kansas City. Together, these entities are working together with their P-12 school partners to begin the necessary work of equipping highly qualified diverse teachers to assure all urban students can succeed.

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As the executive director of the Institute for Urban Education, Dr. Underwood is responsible for forming and maintaining positive relations between the University and Kansas City community partners as well as leading initiatives to support and extend

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