

Urban Teacher Preparation Academy: Preparing Urban Teachers through a Collaborative Partnership

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Abstract

The Urban Teacher Preparation Academy was developed through a collaborative partnership between the University of Central Oklahoma and the Oklahoma City Public Schools. The goal of the program is to develop effective teachers for urban schools. The development and maintenance of the partnership is discussed through the lens of interorganizational collaboration. The teacher retention rate for the program is above the national norm, and teachers demonstrate many of the characteristics of effective teachers.

One of the persistent challenges for public education is the loss of new teachers during their first years as professional educators. Nearly a third of all teachers entering the profession leave within the first five years (Ingersoll 2002), and the problem is even more pronounced in urban school districts. The National Commission for Teaching and America's Future (2002) reported that 50 percent of urban teachers leave the profession within five years, and in some urban districts this level of turnover occurs in less than three years (Rinke 2001). In addition, where geographical teacher shortages exist, such as in Oklahoma, teacher attrition rates in urban districts increase (Darling-Hammond 2003; Rinke 2001). As a result, urban school districts find themselves with teaching staffs that are less experienced in comparison to suburban and rural districts.

To make matters worse, urban districts have a higher proportion of under-prepared teachers than other districts. There is evidence that under-prepared teachers are more likely to leave the profession than new teachers who received instruction in current teaching methods and whose preparation included a clinical teaching experience (Darling-Hammond 2010). A similar pattern holds with regards to teaching certification. Teachers who enter the profession uncertified or with an emergency or alternative certification are more likely to leave the profession than teachers who enter fully certified (Darling-Hammond 2010).

There is strong evidence that the level of teacher preparation and years of experience have a positive impact on teacher self-efficacy (Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow 2002) and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005). In urban

districts with larger proportions of inexperienced and under-prepared teachers, students are more at risk of not meeting state standards, which burdens districts and communities with the added cost of remediation, grade retention, and dropouts (Darling-Hammond 2010). However, studies suggest (Boyd et al. 2008; Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor 2007) that providing low-income students with high-quality and experienced teachers can close the achievement gap between poorer schools and more affluent schools.

Over the last several years there have been a number of efforts to address the need for recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in urban districts. Teacher residency programs such as those in Denver, Boston, and Chicago have produced 90 percent retention rates after three years (Berry, Montgomery, and Synder 2008). Papay et al. (2012) identified a number of important results based on their study of the Boston Teacher Residency program including a more racially diverse teaching population, an increase in those prepared to teach science and mathematics, and greater retention in the profession through the fifth year of service. Additionally, valued-added measures of student growth indicated program graduates' increased effectiveness in time. Although differences were not apparent in English language arts and mathematics during the first few years of teaching, by their fourth and fifth years, program graduates outperformed veteran teachers.

In response to a shortage of qualified teachers to fill the vacancies in the Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), as well as the University of Central Oklahoma's (UCO) need for quality student teaching experiences for teacher candidates in urban schools, these organizations partnered to develop the Urban Teacher Preparation Academy (UTPA). In brief, the UTPA provides teacher candidates extended experiences with urban communities, schools, teachers, and P-12 students over a three and a half year period. This includes a yearlong student teaching and then two years of mentoring and targeted professional development for those employed with the OKCPS. The components of the UTPA will be described in more detail later.

In this paper we will discuss the partnership between Oklahoma City Public Schools and the College of Education and Professional Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma, and which now includes the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. Specifically, we will (1) present environmental factors that facilitated the formation of the partnership, (2) discuss the development of the partnership through the lens of interorganizational collaboration, and (3) provide some preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of the program.

Environmental Factors

The partnership was facilitated by a number of environmental factors. Among those factors were OKCPS's need for teachers and UCO's need for urban school partners that could provide high-quality mentoring for student teachers. When the UTPA was developed, OKCPS regularly had large numbers of certified teaching vacancies that remained unfilled each school year. Several issues provided a challenge for the district,

and Oklahoma schools in general, in recruiting teachers. Low teacher pay, limited instructional resources, increased accountability measures based on student performance outcomes, and quickly implemented school reform initiatives resulted in many teachers expressing feelings of blame, demoralization, and stress. Additionally, according to a 2010–2011 statistical profile OKCPS reported a high rate of student poverty (90 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and a substantial number of students whose first language at home was not English (about 34 percent)—two potential challenges for learners. In regards to mentor teachers OKCPS has the largest number of National Board Certified Teachers in the state, and over the last several years has produced a number of Oklahoma State Teachers of the Year.

The partnership was also influenced by state budget shortfalls that resulted in reductions in several areas. One of the most important reductions affecting teacher preparation and new teachers was the elimination of funding for the Resident-Year Teacher program that had been in place for decades to support first-year teachers in the state. With the elimination of state funding for this program, school districts and universities were hard-pressed to have the resources necessary to adequately provide the critical support and guidance required by the vast majority of first-year teachers. Through the partnership, the mentoring and support network included in UTPA filled this gap.

The partnership was further facilitated by the need to work together to obtain funding for the academy. Initially, UCO and OKCPS submitted a Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) proposal through the United States Department of Education to help meet the goals envisioned for the UTPA. The TQP Grants Program was to fund initiatives to improve the quality of new teachers by creating partnerships among institutions of higher education and high-need school districts, especially in hard to staff schools. However, the proposal was not funded.

Following a review of the grant proposal feedback, leaders from the college and school district continued to believe that the goals and design of the program were sound and that the momentum created in building the coalition should be utilized. Efforts then were focused on funding the UTPA with resources available within the organizations. A commitment was made by UCO to fund “in kind” contributions including stipends for UCO faculty members developing curricula and tuition-waivers for students. OKCPS funded teacher assistant salaries to program participants who would be completing their yearlong student teaching in district. Additional resources were sought and provided by a local foundation.

Urban Teacher Preparation Academy

Program Design

Three goals served as the focus for the development of the academy. These were (1) to enhance the preparation of pre-service teachers to better serve the diverse needs of students in high need schools in urban environments; (2) to infuse at a deeper level current and emerging technologies into teaching and learning for pre-service

candidates, in-service teachers, and P-12 students; and (3) to provide a richer, expanded set of student teaching experiences for pre-service and new teachers. As a result of collaborative efforts, a program was designed where the first year and a half occurs while candidates are teacher education students, followed by two years of support while employed as a teacher by OKCPS.

Each fall, teacher education students who are nearing the completion of their course of study and have an expressed interest in teaching in high-need schools in urban settings are recruited to apply to UTPA. Students must submit an application, three recommendation letters, have a 2.75 grade point average (GPA) or higher or a 3.0 GPA in their last thirty hours of coursework, and must go through the interview process. The interview panel consists of university staff and faculty, UTPA coordinators, and personnel from OKCPS Office of Human Capital. Through joint decision-making, academy members are selected based on the following: the candidate's ability to meet teacher education and graduation requirements of the university, accreditation criteria and certification requirements of the State of Oklahoma during the academic year, the availability of district positions in the content areas in the upcoming academic year, and perceptions of the candidate's "fit" with the urban educational setting. Selections are announced each fall with the yearlong student teaching experience beginning the next fall.

In the spring semester following acceptance into the program, students begin the enhanced curriculum. Professional development is provided in modifying instruction for English language learners and students with other special needs, understanding the needs of students in economically challenging environments, appropriate classroom management methods for students from culturally diverse backgrounds, the use of student performance data to modify curriculum and instruction in the context of school-based teams, and teaching literacy. Students also participate in service learning activities to better acquaint them with the community, parents, and students they will serve. For example, the UTPA collaborates with the Oklahoma City Police Department (OKCPD). OKCPD provides "Gang Awareness" training and UTPA participants tutor individuals who are part of OKCPD's FACT program. The FACT program works to positively intervene in students' lives, especially those who come from neighborhoods exhibiting high levels of gang involvement. UTPA also partners with Youth Services of Oklahoma County (YSOC). YSOC provides resources such as food, clothing, counseling, tutoring, and shelter to some of Oklahoma City's 1,800 homeless students. UTPA participants volunteer at YSOC and in return receive education about resources that are available to help this population.

During the summer prior to student teaching, candidates participate in a co-teaching workshop with their mentor teacher. The primary focus of the co-teaching workshop is to train teachers in implementing a co-teaching model for the yearlong internship. Unlike other approaches to student teaching, where mentees may spend much of their time as observers, co-teaching emphasizes shared responsibility, and hands-on instructional activities with P-12 students throughout the student teaching experience. Shared responsibility refers not only to how mentor and mentee interact during teaching, but also shared decisions regarding planning, instructional methods, and

interacting with students. For part of the workshop mentees attend and participate in activities to help the mentor and mentee become acquainted.

The yearlong internship is completed in OKCPS. Candidates start their student teaching when school and in-service activities begin in the fall and are to co-teach with their mentor teacher until the last day of school. Candidates also receive support and guidance from university faculty supervisors, who observe them teaching five times a semester. As part of the yearlong clinical experience, OKCPS hires UTPA participants as teaching assistants after they fulfill the state-legislated twelve weeks of unpaid internship. This allows student teachers to get paid, have health insurance, and receive a year credit toward Oklahoma teacher retirement.

Upon completion of student teaching, those hired by OKCPS receive two years of continued assistance. This includes once a month professional development meetings, one-on-one support from National Board Certified mentor teachers, participation in a professional education network, and continued visits from university supervisors.

Interorganizational Collaboration

The partnership between OKCPS and UCO is complex, involving numerous individuals and departments, including the Office of the Superintendent, Human Capital, Title Programs and Professional Development, and school sites from OKCPS; and the Office of the Dean, Teacher Education Services, and teacher education faculty at UCO who must work together to advance and sustain the UTPA in areas of funding, human capital, and teaching and learning. The success of the UTPA has been, in part, due to the ability of partners to work together to eliminate barriers and to support the needs of administrators, teachers, and program candidates. In this section we will discuss defining characteristics of the partnership and issues through the lens of *interorganizational collaborations*.

A key element of interorganizational collaboration needed to establish and sustain a working partnership across organization boundaries is the development of trust. Vagan and Huxman's (2003) review of literature on building trust among partners suggests that trust is a cyclical process. The cycle begins with organizations setting reasonable and obtainable outcomes. Through the success of these ventures trust is built, which provides support for engaging in more ambitious projects.

Trust has been crucial to the development and continued growth of the UTPA. The implementation of the UTPA was facilitated by the exceptionally strong positive relationship between the superintendent of OKCPS and the dean and associate dean of the College of Education and Professional Studies at UCO that had been developed through previous ventures. Constant, face-to-face communication has been key in sustaining trust, as well as the inclusion of OKCPS staff in planning, professional development, and the selection of UTPA candidates. As a result of these actions strong relationships have developed between key leaders in the program at the university and in the school district. Underlying the development of trust is a shared realization that

collaborators must remain patient regarding the pace of change, when working with institutional dynamics that are foreign to their own experiences.

Besides trust, this partnership exhibits other characteristics of interorganizational partnerships such as the networking of the expertise across organizations and units (Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence 2003; Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr 1996), the sharing of resources and knowledge (Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr 1996), and interdependency (Gray 1985). Each is discussed later with regards to the UTPA.

Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr (1996) argued that organizations are finding that the often-dispersed knowledge required for innovation is better obtained through long-term collaborations rather than temporary relationships. Through networks of learning, expertise is shared among partners. Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence (2003) noted that collaboration not only results in the sharing of existing knowledge, but also facilitates the creation of new knowledge that can be used to create synergistic solutions. Addressing the needs of UTPA candidates has required the sharing of expertise by members of both OKCPS and UCO. Participants in these learning networks, through their collaborative efforts, have found innovative ways to manage many issues including how to accelerate teacher candidates through course requirements in a shorter length of time to enable a yearlong student teaching experience at school sites; how to provide teacher candidates the skills to teach in schools with students from impoverished backgrounds and with a large numbers of English language learners; work together to review applications and screen candidates that are a good fit in urban schools; locate resources needed to attract top teacher candidates to the program; and respond to requests for candidates to be placed as classroom teachers prior to the conclusion of the full year of student teaching experiences.

Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr (1996) pointed out that in collaborative relationships where knowledge is shared that the boundaries among organizations become permeable, supporting the transfer of knowledge across partners. In the case of the UTPA, school district leaders have become more aware of the realities facing leaders of teacher preparation institutions, including limited financial resources, curricular requirements and timelines, student financial aid regulations, and accreditation processes and professional standards for retaining the authority to recommend state certification. Simultaneously, leaders and faculty from the teacher preparation program have become more keenly aware of the vast challenges associated with ensuring student success and learning in P-12 schools during a time of reduced budgets, heightened expectations and accountability, and oft expressed disillusionment.

Gray (1985) suggested that collaborative efforts needed to focus around the interdependencies that connect partners, rather than on the actions of any single partner. *Teacher preparation programs cannot succeed without strong partners in schools who ensure teacher candidates are placed with a strong mentor teacher and principal during required field experiences. Schools and school districts rely heavily on teacher preparation institutions as the supply chain for teachers and other school personnel, which the UTPA was developed to address.* A particular challenge has been addressing

the requirements and needs of the partners with regards to the yearlong student teaching experience, and has required university and district officials to navigate issues such as teacher-appropriate job duties for teaching assistants (TA), hiring of candidates as full-time teachers prior to the completing of the yearlong clinical experience out of district necessity, and placements with not only proven teachers but ones who are strong mentors. Each issue is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Academy participants are student teachers who must fulfill university requirements to graduate and be recommended for teacher certification, but after twelve weeks the candidates become employees with responsibilities and duties determined by administrators in OKCPS. Contrary to the goal of the program of a yearlong co-teaching experience, when UTPA candidates become TAs, principals may use them to address current needs. This means TAs may be removed from their mentor's classroom and used to cover others when teachers are absent, to tutor students who are receiving remediation, or to fulfill other duties such as monitoring testing. As yet, a solution has not been developed for how to meet the goal of a yearlong co-teaching experience and address the current staffing needs of the school.

Although academy members are to do a yearlong student teaching experience, schools with high needs often have vacancies that need to be staffed as soon as possible. If a student teacher has passed all required certification tests and completed all coursework and program requirements in December, halfway through the internship, the university may work with the principal to "release" the academy participant early to accept a full-time certified teaching position in district. The employed teacher is still expected by the university and the district to continue with the monthly UTPA activities as if they were still student teaching, since membership in the academy continues. Sometimes, however, a candidate would likely be better served through the yearlong experience with a mentor teacher. Currently, there is not a process among the partners to determine if the best course of action would be for the candidate to remain with their mentor all year. There are immediate plans to establish an oversight board to discuss issues such as this one and the duties of candidates while employed as a TA.

Placement of student teachers has been a challenge associated with the student teaching experience. Placements must consider the mentors who are available to provide a quality internship, a key period that could impact a participant's longevity in the district or perhaps the profession. Candidates can be assigned only to schools that will employ them as a TA after completion of the twelve weeks of state-mandated student teaching. Schools finance the TA position with Title 1 monies and in some cases schools with a strong mentor have dedicated the Title 1 funds to other uses. In other situations it would be beneficial to move a student teacher to provide a better student teaching experience. However, this can be difficult, as Title 1 allocations cannot be transferred from one school to another. To address these issues the district is currently considering changes in how the TA positions are funded.

The UTPA liaison for the OKCPS has been instrumental in working with the program coordinator at UCO to address many of the challenges the UTPA has experienced with

student teaching placements and hiring. In addition, UTPA leadership meetings have helped to ensure both UCO and OKCPS continue to share a common set of expectations regarding professional dispositions, responsibilities and clinical year employment, as well as to address the shifting needs and demands of the program.

Collaborative partnerships that are characterized by trust, shared knowledge across organizations, and a synthesis of expertise from all partners when seeking solutions can help organizations become more competitive (Vangan and Huxman 2003). This has been the case with the UTPA and its position in relation to Teach for American (TFA), an organization that provides an alternative pathway to teacher credentialing for individuals who agree to work in hard-to-staff schools in urban and rural settings. TFA began its presence in Oklahoma by placing teachers in the Tulsa Public Schools and two years later expanded to Oklahoma City. While this development was positive in terms of generating more new teachers with interest in teaching in metropolitan Oklahoma schools, the agreement between the OKCPS district and TFA required significant funding from the school district, civic leaders, and local organizations, and as a result created competition between the UTPA and TFA for already scarce resources.

Although TFA has remained in the district, there has been a growing demand from the district for more participants in the UTPA. This has led to OKCPS reallocating resources to better support the needs of the UTPA and to investigating the efficacy of expanding the program consortium with additional universities. To grow the program, OKCPS recently created a new position dedicated to directing the UTPA as the district works to house the “hub” for the UTPA. Prior to this change in staffing, an administrator in Human Capital served as the liaison, a set of extra duties additional to other full-time job demands.

While the higher education institutions will be responsible for overseeing teacher candidates who have graduated from their programs, after the student teaching experience the OKCPS Urban Teacher Preparation Academy coordinator will become the primary manager of district issues related to the academy such as employee accountability to the UTPA and administrative support for UTPA members. Plans are that this coordinator will collaborate with principals so that they understand the expectations of the program and the role of the UTPA participant, assist the participants during all stages of the academy, share information relevant to the program, act as a liaison between the district and the higher education institutions, and facilitate opportunities for ongoing program evaluation and research. Having a district official dedicated for these purposes will enhance communication and problem solving that is necessary for interorganizational collaborations.

Effectiveness of the UTPA

Retention

Over the last four years, forty-six teacher candidates have completed the academy and regardless of their area of certification have found employment. Of the thirty-four

UTPA graduates with one to three years of teaching, twenty-five (74 percent) are employed by the Oklahoma City Public Schools. An additional five graduates are employed in other school districts for an overall retention rate of 88 percent. Of the twelve candidates that just completed the program, two have decided not to teach, nine have accepted employment with the OKCPS, and one is still seeking employment.

Qualified

All UTPA graduates exit the program as highly qualified in the content areas and grade-levels they will teach. Besides passing the state teacher exams for content area and pedagogical expertise, graduates of the program must successfully complete a program portfolio demonstrating their growth and expertise as a professional educator, and receive the recommendation of the Teacher Education Services at UCO to obtain standard teacher certification.

Effectiveness

Preliminary findings from a study by Nelson et al. (2013) suggest that UTPA teachers are utilizing teaching practices consistent with effective teaching. Classroom observations were conducted of student teachers and first year teachers six weeks into the fall semester. Two observers watched each teacher for a period of two hours. Observations focused on three domains; instructional practice, classroom management, and classroom environment. From the data, areas of strength and of weakness were identified for each domain.

With regards to instruction, strengths were identified in the areas of content knowledge and the use of pedagogical practices to support active learning. A sound knowledge of content was demonstrated during teacher-directed instruction and feedback in response to student opinions and questions. Teachers used a variety of instructional strategies to support active learning. This included the use of whole-group instruction and discussions where teachers encouraged active learning through their use of questions. Various small group configurations were used that supported active learning, such as centers at the early childhood and elementary level. Dyads and groups of four were commonly used for collaborative activities at the secondary level.

Weaknesses were identified in several areas. Teachers seldom clearly identified the learner outcome for the lesson or ended the lesson with a closure activity. There was limited use of technology to increase student engagement or to make real-world connections, and the use of individualized instructional methods such as sheltered instruction for English language learners was seldom evident.

Teachers were observed to be organized and to have established classroom procedures. Lessons were prepared; teachers were familiar with what was planned; supplies and materials were ready to use; and classrooms were generally arranged to support the lesson; all of which helped to maximize instructional time. Routines and procedures were in place for task such as bell work, handing in assignments, transitions, and cleaning up, though students sometimes needed reminders or were slow to perform. It

was observed that teachers frequently did not do an effective job of monitoring the level of on-task behavior: not scanning all the classroom, not moving through all areas of the classroom, and not attending to student conversations closely enough to determine if the focus was on the instructional task.

Classroom environment was an area where the teachers excelled. Teachers were observed to have positive and respectful relationships with students and to encourage a sense of community among students. In conversations teachers found opportunities to demonstrate interest in the personal lives of their students. Teachers exhibited calm demeanors and used humor, corrective feedback, and encouragement to support on-task behaviors. Instances of minor misbehavior by students were minimal and were handled efficiently, without disrupting instruction or demeaning students. No major disruptions or misbehaviors were observed.

In exit interviews, following the completion of the yearlong student teaching experience, graduates consistently expressed the belief that they are prepared for their first year of teaching in OKCPS and confident in their ability to be an effective teacher. Graduates identify three components of the program as major contributors to their sense of preparedness and confidence. One component was the yearlong student teaching experience. The graduates stated that experiencing the school year from beginning to end and the additional opportunities of working with students were important. A second component was the support network that is developed among members of the cohort and that is available at the monthly meetings. The third component was experiences and professional development that helped to improved their understanding and ability to teach students from urban schools. While no single experience or development activity was identified, those mentioned were directly related to teaching urban students. While survey data, informal interviews, and discussions during professional development meetings with first- and some second-year teachers suggest that they are not as confident as they were prior to employment, the teachers maintain that the UTPA has prepared them to be successful teachers.

Support for the program has grown in OKCPS with more principals requesting to host and hire UTPA teacher candidates. In the first year of the UTPA, there were three OKCPS partner sites. Four years later, there are ten school sites hosting student teachers, and a total of twenty-one sites have a member of the UTPA on staff. Conversations with principals suggest that UTPA graduates are better prepared than other new hires. In particular, principals identified that UTPA teaches have a better working knowledge of the problems encountered in urban schools and are more confident in working with a diverse student population. Principals also emphasized the passion that UTPA teachers have for working with students.

Conclusion

Preliminary evidence suggests that the UTPA is producing qualified teachers that are prepared for the challenges of working in urban school settings. Particularly noteworthy are the positive teacher-student interactions and classroom climates that

were observed, the use of pedagogical practices that support active learning, and the sound content knowledge demonstrated during instruction. Developing rapport and respectful relationships is consistently identified as a key characteristic of effective urban teachers (Poplin et al. 2011; Talbort-Johnson 2006; Thompson, Rousseau, and Randsell 2005), and there is evidence that the use of instruction that involves active learning is a characteristic of effective teachers. (McBer 2001; Thompson, Rousseau, and Randsell 2005). Finally, studies have shown that knowledge of the content being taught is a characteristic of effective teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor 2006; Darling-Hammond and Youngs 2002).

The program shows promise in producing teachers that will choose to remain teaching in urban schools. At this time all teachers that accepted employment with OKCPS have remained in the district. The retention rate for UTPA graduates is above national averages (Ingersoll 2001) though somewhat below the three-year rates reported for Teacher Residency Programs (Berry et al. 2008). A few more years of data as well as comparison studies are needed to draw firmer conclusions regarding the success of the program.

The challenges and success of the partnership between UCO and the OKCPS in the development and maintenance of the UTPA can be understood through literature on interorganizational collaborations. Particularly key in the case of the UTPA was the establishment of trust, the networking of expertise, and the sharing of resources and knowledge. The most persistent challenges have been associated with the interdependence that is present in collaborative partnerships. This has been particularly acute with regards to the yearlong internship where the shorter-term needs of the school frequently take precedence over the longer-term goals of teacher preparation programs. For the university-district collaboration to remain healthy and thrive, officials must continue to develop trust through communication, patience, and negotiation. The UTPA demonstrates a successful approach to preparing teachers who are effective and who remain in the OKCPS so that the university-district collaboration can advance education and the local community.

From a broader perspective open communication and commitment to shared initiatives has allowed both institutions to better understand the challenges each is facing and has allowed for problem-solving in the interest of better meeting the needs of P-12 learners, especially in the urban setting. Lessons learned from our collaboration have shaped many of the approaches UCO is currently utilizing on a larger scale to revision all of its education programs. This includes approaches aimed at recruiting teacher candidates, advancing targeted student teaching experiences, cultivating stronger partner school alliances, and developing and sustaining lasting and productive relationships with teacher candidates, program graduates, P-12 mentors, and school personnel.

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