Are We Providing the Effect in the Effectiveness of Educator Preparation Programs?

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ABSTRACT

Every educator preparation program hopes to produce graduates ready to be teachers. In Texas, preservice educators must be prepared not only to teach but to meet the minimum criteria of a state developed educator competency exam. This competency exam known as the ExCET and the new TExES exam has proven to bring terror to the hearts of students and faculty. The purpose of this study was to identify the effect in the effectiveness of our educator preparation program. Results indicated a high degree of satisfaction with teaching effectiveness. Concerns were found in the area of competency exam preparation.
**Preparation Requirements for Certification**

As former public school teachers, most of us can remember the fear felt when we reached our final semester known as “student teaching”. We were plagued with the questions; were we ready; would we even stay in the profession; what had we done with our lives? We even questioned our effectiveness as an educator. Some felt prepared as we exited our program, equipped with the most current pedagogical practices and technological strategies. How could our educator preparation programs have predicted the changes in today’s educational environments? These changes, mandates, standards and criteria have added to the pressures that most programs face as they strive to effectively prepare preservice teachers.

Educator preparation programs have a long history of being governed not only by the boards of higher education and state level agencies issuing teaching certificates; but now must include standards required of national and state accrediting agencies and other educational related organizations. Many face the challenges of addressing the interrelated issues of entry/exit standards, the clinical experience, curriculum, and licensure requirements along with a mirage of other criteria brought about to prepare our preservice educators (www.aft.org, 2002). To produce an effective product, great emphasis must be focused on a wide range of areas within our preparation programs.

Every educator preparation program hopes to have graduates that feel they are ready to go out into the profession. In the state of Texas, preservice educators must be prepared for a wide range of skills in the areas of 1) understanding the learner, 2) enhancing student achievement, and 3) understanding the teaching environment. The Professional Development Exam for Certification of Educators in Texas covers domains and competencies from these three areas. Not only does the entity have to meet these requirements for effective educator preparation, but must also look at skills needed in a variety of areas.
Preparation programs must address issues of diversity, inclusion, provide a balance to theory and practice, classroom management, instructional diversity, accountability, state mandated levels of skill development as well as a pyramid of additional areas. These are to build on the success of a “great” teacher. To be effective, we must work to transition the mindset of the preservice educator from that of student to instructional manager or teacher (Zelazek, J. R., Williams, W. W., McAdams, C & Palmer, K., 2001).

One of the more significant roles of the educator preparation program is educator certification. At the completion of specific course work, field-based and clinical experiences, and other state mandated requirements such as certification exams; preservice educators are to be ready for certification. It is the responsibility of the educator preparation entity to adequately prepare the student for their certification exam.

In Texas, the ExCET exam and its future replacement exam known as the TExES, has placed more fear in the hearts of preservice educators and their preparation programs that any other type of exam. This is due in part to the accountability of the educator preparation program to have a specific passage rate based on each ethnic group taking the exam (San Miguel, T., Garza, R. & Gibbs, W., 2000). During the last semester of their educator preparation program, most students have taken at least one of the exams required for certification. Each student is required to take a Professional Development exam and one or two others depending on their teaching level (i.e., elementary) or specialty area (i.e., secondary math, secondary science, etc.). Those with certification in areas such as special education or early childhood currently have a third exam to complete their certification requirements.

Effective Program Monitoring

One of the most proactive activities of any educator preparation entity is to monitor the effectiveness of its educator preparation program. In essence, we are to see what is the “effect” of our effectiveness. All programs should respond to needed changes that will enhance and bring about reforms that prepare the preservice educator to be successful in their career (Godt, P. T., Benelli, C. & Kline, R., 2002; Guntermann, 1997). An effective program is constantly adjusting to a changing environment (Coker & Wilkerson, 1997).

The primary focus of educator preparation programs should be helping our students meet the challenges of today’s schools. We don’t need to find out after
the fact that they felt their preservice training had not prepared them for the vast demands of the profession. Data collected from our evaluations will be redundant if we don’t refine the process and take the steps needed to match the delivery of our educator programs with the “real” world (DelGesso & Smith, 1993). Information from the data is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the educator preparation program in a variety of areas. Relationships are identified between the students’ perceptions of how adequately they feel prepared for teaching and the effectiveness of the scope, nature and quality of their program.

The Study

As part of the evaluation of the educator preparation program at Lamar University, interns are asked to provide both quantitative and qualitative feedback on their clinical experience. Spring 2001, they were asked to complete a questionnaire that rated their confidence in several areas of their overall educator preparation experience. Of those completing their student teaching semester, 70 responded to the survey.

This review is part of a longitudinal study of student teachers’ perceptions of the effect of their educator preparation programs on their student teaching experience. Both Likert scale type and open-ended questions were used. Information was compared in several areas with greater focus on the overall feeling of being adequately prepared for teaching prior to the student teaching experience as well as preparation for the ExCET exam for teacher certification.

Overall effectiveness of the teacher education program was measured through a rating scale with values indicating how the respondent felt about the effectiveness of their teacher education program and preparation for their ExCET exam, a requirement for Texas educator certification. Each participant rated his or her views on a scale ranging from Strongly Agrees to Strongly Disagrees.

Results

The following results were found after reviewing the data from the seventy respondents. These participants rated the adequacy of their program’s effectiveness in preparing them for their clinical experience. Data were evaluated
in the areas of how the respondents felt about how adequately they had been prepared for teaching and how prepared they were to take the Texas education certification exam (ExCET).

In Table 1, close to half of those responding, (n=32), 45.7% agreed they were adequately prepared for teaching prior to the clinical experience. The next largest percentage, 22.9% (n=16) strongly agreed that they felt adequately prepared to teach prior to their clinical experience. Fewer participants responded more negatively toward the effectiveness of their educator preparation program. Only 17.1% (n=12) disagreed and 4.3% or (n=3) strongly disagreed that they felt adequately prepared for teaching prior to the student teaching experience. Ten percent (n=7) were undecided as to how prepared they felt for teaching prior to the clinical experience.

The greatest number of respondents, a total of 68.6% or just over two-thirds, indicated favorable responses to the effectiveness of their educator preparation program. These responses indicated that they felt adequately prepared for teaching prior to the clinical experience. Less than one-fourth or 21.4% indicated negative responses. These individuals did not feel adequately prepared for teaching prior to the clinical experience.

The significance of the results were that overall, the respondents felt that their educator preparation program had been effective in preparing them for their role as a teacher. A satisfaction level was seen in greater than two-thirds of the respondents. These individuals agreed that they were ready for their role as an educator. Another important aspect of this data is that it was collected at the end of the clinical experience when the students were finishing their educator preparation program. Those completing their certification requirements felt that the components of their programs had provided the knowledge base and skills needed to adequately function as a teacher.

It was also important to note that less than one-fourth did not feel adequately prepared. In reviewing this data, 21.4% indicated that they did not feel ready for their role as an educator. This is considered to be a low percentage since the teacher education program has been moving from a more traditional-based to include field-based courses prior to the clinical semester.
In Table 2, data are reviewed comparing the overall perception toward feeling prepared to take the educator certification exam (ExCET exam). Just over one-third of the respondents 37.1%, \((n = 26)\), agreed they were adequately prepared for the ExCET exam, a requirement for their certification in Texas. The next largest response, 20.0%, \((n=14)\), disagreed that they felt adequately prepared for the ExCET Exam. The third largest response level was strongly agreed, with 18.6%, \((n=13)\). These respondents felt extremely favorable in their overall preparation for the ExCET Exam. The next response level was that of strongly disagree with 15.7%, \((n=11)\).

Although there was a greater number of individuals indicating a more positive perception of how their program had prepared them for their certification exam, 55.7%, \((n=38)\), there a significant number of individuals that did not feel adequately prepared. Over a third of the respondents, 35.7%, \((n=25)\), did not feel they were adequately prepared for the ExCET exam. More participants felt better prepared for their role as an educator than they did for taking the educator certification exam.
Table 2

Overall Attitude of Feeling Adequately Prepared for ExCET Exam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagrees</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagrees</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

As educator preparation programs, it is imperative that we monitor how we “effect” our program effectiveness. It is easy to collect this data, write an article, and continue on the same track. So many times we look at our curriculum without tying it to the feelings of our students. No one wants to go through a program and realize they are not prepared for their career. They also do not want to take their educator certification exam and find out they do not have the knowledge base and skills needed to master this task.

Preservice educators need more than a broad knowledge base that includes their content area, curriculum management, diversity awareness, etc. They need to feel that they will be successful on their job and their educator certification exam. Adjustments need to be made to the curriculum to include not only an enriched knowledge base with best practices, but also the skills needed to master their educator certification exam. Course activities that include exam questions based on their certification exam, test taking strategies, the identification of best practices along with implementation can play a role in helping students feel prepared for both their job as well as their certification exam.

Educator preparation programs need to identify the “real fears” of their candidates. These fears are probably the reason many fail to remain in the field. When a program works proactively in identifying these concerns early, changes can be made that might keep educators in the field longer. If we want our preservice teachers to become effective educators, we must find how to put the “effect” back into our preparation programs.
References

Building a profession: Strengthening teacher preparation and induction.


