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Transition to Graduate Level Elementary Teacher Preparation: A Formative Analysis

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Abstract

This study provides a formative evaluation of the transition from a traditional four-year bachelor's level elementary education program to a fifth year master of education (M.Ed.) program on a regional campus of a major research university. For a three-year period the newly instituted M.Ed. program ran concurrently with the bachelor's certification program while this traditional program was being phased out. Comparisons of teaching placement rates for both groups indicated the M.Ed. group had a placement rate twice as high as the bachelor's graduates. Other factors analyzed include enrollment patterns, student profiles, staffing and cost implications, and relationships with teachers and administrators in the schools providing field and student teaching placements.

In June, 1992, seventeen students assembled as a cohort group to enter an intensive five-quarter Master of Education (M.Ed.) program at The Ohio State University—Newark (OSU-N). Their meeting marked the beginning of the transition from undergraduate to graduate level elementary teacher preparation on this regional campus.

The *purpose* of this study was to examine the impact of this transition and to provide a formative evaluation of the first three years of the new M.Ed. program. Factors examined included enrollment patterns, student profiles, staffing implications including cost, relationships with teachers and administrators in K-8 schools in which field and student teaching placements were made, and teaching placement data from those completing the program.

The College of Education at The Ohio State University became a charter member of the Holmes Group in 1986 when a majority of the education faculty committed themselves to the concept of graduate level teacher preparation as promoted by this consortium of approximately one hundred major research institutions (Holmes Group, 1986). The elementary education program area was the first in the college to phase out its undergraduate teacher certification program. Replacing it was a post-baccalaureate certification program referred to as the M.Ed. certification program. A bachelor's level pre-certification degree program, similar in premise to pre-med programs, also commenced at this time. This pre-certification program was to be one avenue for admission into the fifth year M.Ed. program which would, upon completion, meet state department of education certification requirements. Students possessing a bachelor's degree in any field would also be eligible to apply to the M.Ed. program, so the M.Ed. program could begin before graduates of the pre-certification program had matriculated. On the Newark campus, the M.Ed. program began in 1992, as did

the pre-certification program. The last group of students already enrolled in the traditional four year undergraduate elementary education certification program would not graduate until December of 1995. Thus for a three year period the new M.Ed. program would run concurrently with the traditional program.

The concept of post-baccalaureate teacher preparation is not new. California abolished the undergraduate degree in education in 1962 (Tierney & McKibbin, 1993). Although the debate regarding teacher preparation has been heated in this era of educational reform, there are few studies comparing graduates of different programs (Andrew, 1991). What literature exists has produced mixed results, as tremendous variation exists among programs labeled 'alternative' as well as among those termed 'traditional.' Some alternative programs are 'quick-entry' programs, in which candidates are placed into classrooms as interns without prior teaching experience. Academic preparation may be as brief as a one summer seminar. In such programs, certification requirements are substantially altered. In a review of such quick-entry routes, Darling-Hammond and Goodwin (1993) reported teachers thus prepared have difficulty with many aspects of teaching and are less able to meet student needs. The weight of research indicates that fully prepared teachers are in fact more highly rated and more successful with students than are teachers without full preparation for licensure (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993, p. 32).

Two recent studies lend further support to this position. In a study relating time of preparation to teaching concerns, a relationship was found between a candidate's degree of success in making the transition from student to teacher and time in preparation (Marso & Pigge, 1995). In another study comparing undergraduate and graduate student teachers, McDermott, Gormely, Rotherberg, and Hamner (1995) found the thinking of undergraduates with ex-

tensive field experience prior to student teaching had advanced through more stages of teacher development than the thinking of graduate students without prior field experience.

A few studies have compared graduates of traditional undergraduate programs with post-baccalaureate programs similar to the OSU-N program. Shannon (1993) reported post-baccalaureate graduates at one institution had higher scores on all four sections of the NTE than did graduates of the traditional four year program. Candidate satisfaction with the post-baccalaureate program was high, as were performance evaluations of teaching after graduation. MacDonald, Manning and Gable (1994) reported that 'schools and youth benefit significantly' from the expertise of graduates of a post-baccalaureate teacher education program at another institution. They further reported a higher than average incidence of job placement for these graduates. Another ten year longitudinal study comparing graduates of a traditional four year program with graduates of a five year post-baccalaureate program at one institution reported that significantly more post-baccalaureate graduates entered and stayed in teaching than graduates of the four year program. The post-baccalaureate graduates were also more satisfied with their career and rated the quality of their program higher than did the four year graduates (Andrew, 1991).

In a study of the post-baccalaureate elementary education preparation program on the OSU main campus that was the prototype for the M.Ed. program instituted on the Newark campus, Loadman and Gustafson (1990) found the opposite regarding teacher placement of post-baccalaureate graduates. A follow-up study of graduates during the 1987-89 academic years from both post-degree and traditional programs found a higher percentage of the post-baccalaureate program graduates were not teaching. The graduates of both programs were similar, however, on self and program ratings, teaching satisfaction, and views of teaching.

In a study analyzing the marketability of Homes program graduates from several institutions, Young and Jury (1994) noted that the extra investment these students had made in time and effort did not produce an employment advantage over graduates of traditional certification programs. The Holmes program graduates' chances of receiving an interview for a teaching position were no greater than the chances for traditional graduates.

Among these conflicting findings there is one area in which there appears to be a general consensus. A review of alternative programs has indicated that one of the key features contributing to their success is collaboration with K-12 educators during all phases of the program, beginning with initial program planning. MacDonald, Manning and Gable (1994) discussed the value of having master teachers as an integral part of the instructional and field placement facets of the program and the willingness of collaborating school districts to place and hire the alternative program

graduates. Shannon (1990) reported that the successful alternative program at Virginia Wesleyan University was developed after extensive consultation with local school districts and an assessment of their needs. Young and Jury (1994) recommended that principals be apprised of the advantages associated with Holmes graduates and that candidates as well as programs be aggressively marketed.

Data and Analysis

Student admission records were examined to determine M.Ed. candidates' undergraduate degrees and other demographic information. Personal inventories completed by students admitted into the program provided information on their former work and educational history, in addition to personal information indicating their status as parents, prior involvement in working with children, etc. As candidates progressed through the program, advising reports provided information on their academic progress and field placement evaluations by both their supervisors and cooperating teachers indicated their progress in classroom experience and practice teaching. After completion of the M.Ed. program, placement office records and data obtained by personal communication with the graduates have been used to determine their success in securing teaching positions.

Reactions of teachers and administrators to the M. Ed. program were obtained from a variety of sources. Minutes from the quarterly elementary education advisory committee consisting of educators from OSU-N and from all seven school districts in which field and student teachers are placed recorded concerns and questions school district personnel voiced regarding the program. A log of concerns raised by teachers supervising M.Ed. students in field and student teaching placements was kept by the researcher who supervised M.Ed. students in these placements. The researcher also conducted focused interviews with sixteen selected cooperating teachers of students in both the traditional undergraduate program and the M.Ed. program. In the interviews, perceptions on the level of preparedness of the student teachers and comments about the teacher education program in general were solicited.

For the demographic and personal inventory data obtained on students, descriptive statistics are available; for the interview data, field notes, and meeting minutes, a thematic strategy of data analysis was employed in which similar responses were clustered.

Results

Student Profile

OSU-N draws a large proportion of non-traditional students who are older than the typical undergraduate, including many who have had extensive work experience and many who are parents. The group of M.Ed. students beginning the program from 1992 through 1994 were similar to the undergraduate education population for these factors. The proportion of males in the two programs was also similar, at approximately 25% for both groups.

Of the forty-four students who entered the M.Ed. program between June 1992 and June 1994, two clusters emerged. One group consisted of twenty-six students, or approximately 60% of the total, who were recent college graduates still in their twenties. Some of these students had originally planned to major in education but were discouraged from doing so by parents, counselors, and peers. This group tended to have less experience with children than the second cluster of students that emerged. This second cluster of eighteen students, equally divided in age between their thirties and forties, consisted of students who were in the process of switching careers and/or parents who had been out of the work force raising children. Although this second group had more experience with children than the first group, it was not necessarily in an instructional capacity. Undergraduate degrees of the M.Ed. students were wide-ranging but tended to cluster in the humanities as opposed to science and technology fields. Over a quarter of the M.Ed. students' undergraduate degrees were in psychology, sociology, and criminology. Nine of their degrees were in English, Communication, and Journalism. Six had degrees in the Sciences, followed by four each in the Arts, Business, and Home Economics. Three had degrees in History and Political Science, and two had General Studies degrees.

Job Placement

Though the M.Ed.'s and undergraduate students shared certain characteristics, including having been taught by the same teaching methods instructors and placed in the same district's schools for their field and student teaching experiences, there was a marked difference in their rates of placement in teaching positions upon graduation. During the 1992-93 academic year, seventeen M.Ed. students received their teaching certificates and nine found permanent K-8 teaching positions immediately upon graduation. Of forty-five graduates from the traditional four-year bachelor's program during the same year, fourteen found placements. Data from the second and third years of the M.Ed. program continue to reflect this trend. During the 1993-94 year, 66.6% M.Ed.'s found teaching positions compared to 18.4% of the undergraduates, as only twelve of sixty-five graduates from the bachelor's program secured positions. In the most recent year (1994-95) from which data is available, the M.Ed. graduates still have the advantage in securing teaching positions. Of fourteen graduates in 1995, seven found teaching positions (50%). Among seventy undergraduates, only eighteen are employed as teachers (25%).

An initial explanation for this difference in job placement rates was that the M.Ed. students may be less place-bound than undergraduates, and therefore they may have accepted positions in a wider geographic area having greater teacher demand. In analyzing the teaching position locations of both groups, however, no differences were noted in the percentages of students from either the traditional four-year program or M.Ed. program in accepting out-of-state positions. The overwhelming majority of positions (more than 92%) have been secured in central Ohio for both groups.

Enrollment Patterns

When OSU-N embarked on the M.Ed. program, total education enrollment increases were expected and did materialize during the three years during which the two teacher education programs ran concurrently. It was projected, however, that enrollment would decrease and stabilize after the students in the traditional baccalaureate program had graduated. This has not been the case. After three years of M.Ed. enrollment in the mid-teens, enrollment for the 1995-96 academic year has increased dramatically. Forty-six students began the M.Ed. program in 1995, more than the first three years put together. This necessitated the formation of two cohort groups with over twenty students each. About half of the students in the program this year are among the first graduates of the pre-certification program, and the other half are similar to the M.Ed. students enrolled in the first three years in the program, having degrees in other fields. Projected enrollment for the 1996-97 academic year is at least as high as enrollment for the current year. An additional thirty-six students will have graduated from the pre-certification program by spring of 1996 and will be eligible to enter the M.Ed. program in June of that year. Another thirty students with degrees in other fields have made initial contact with the education advisor to seek admission into the program at that same time. It is conceivable that there would be enough students to begin three M.Ed. cohorts for the 1996-97 academic year, but staffing and space constraints would make the addition of a third cohort impossible. Even with two cohorts currently enrolled, resources are strained and teaching loads have been maximized.

Staffing Implications

The transition to the M.Ed. program has created two minor staffing problems. Because it is a master's level program, all faculty and student teaching supervisors for the program must possess a terminal degree. In the undergraduate program, doctoral students or retired school district personnel with master's degrees had been hired for many part time positions and contributed very positively to the teacher education program. Because these persons do not possess a terminal degree, they can no longer teach or supervise in the M.Ed. program. Finding qualified faculty who possess a terminal degree has been difficult. Cost implications also are a factor as persons with Ph.D.'s are paid at a higher level than those possessing only a master's degree.

A second staffing problem relates to the M.Ed. curriculum. Certain courses from other College of Education departments are part of the M.Ed. core curriculum, whereas in the undergraduate elementary program being phased out, core curriculum was derived solely from the department that housed elementary education. Faculty eligible to teach these core courses reside on the main campus. It has been difficult to find main campus faculty who are willing to drive an hour to the Newark campus to teach these required M.Ed. courses. It has sometimes been necessary to compromise the M.Ed. curriculum sequence in order to find a main cam-

pus faculty member to teach a required core course. For example, a course on pedagogical methods had to be postponed from autumn to spring quarter, with the result that M.Ed. students did not study classroom management methods until they were several weeks into their student teaching experience.

Cost Implications

In addition to the added cost of hiring faculty with terminal degrees, costs for advising M.Ed. students are also higher. Advisors need time to analyze undergraduate transcripts of prospective M.Ed. students with degrees in other fields to determine which courses will transfer and which courses in addition to those in the M.Ed. curriculum will be required for certification. M.Ed. students can opt to take a master's exam or to complete a master's project. Those choosing the project option require an advisor and significant advising time since the M.Ed. curriculum, unlike the M.A. curriculum, does not include any research methods courses.

Another issue related to cost has yet to be resolved. An oft repeated argument for abandoning undergraduate teacher preparation in favor of graduate level preparation was that M.Ed. students would be subsidized by the state at a higher level than that for undergraduates, thus any loss of subsidy from the possibility of lower enrollments would be offset. The subsidy model is complex and is administered differently on regional campuses, so that no clear figures as to this purported advantage have yet been substantiated.

Cooperating Teachers' Reactions to the Program

Although the M.Ed. program at OSU-N could be broadly labeled an alternative program, it is clearly not a quick-entry program. Depending on their undergraduate degree, most M.Ed. students must take course work in addition to the five full-time quarters of study the program requires in order to meet certification requirements. The program also meets all state department of teacher preparation requirements for hours in field placements and student teaching. Yet a frustrating and unforeseen aspect of the M.Ed. program has been a negative reaction and attitude from some cooperating teachers and administrators. Some teachers have admitted their resentment over the fact that M.Ed. students can receive a master's degree in education in a little over a year's time without ever having been a classroom teacher. Their resentment is not quelled by the explanation that the M.Ed. degree is a practitioner's degree and not identical to a master of arts degree. One teacher commented while being interviewed that the M.Ed. students can receive a master's degree more easily than a practicing teacher can. Her perception was echoed by others.

In assessing the abilities of M.Ed. students as compared to undergraduates in field placements, some cooperating teachers tended to be more critical of M.Ed. students than they were of undergraduate students who had also been placed with them. One comment by a cooperating teacher illustrates an almost defensive attitude regarding M.Ed. students: 'They came in looking for what was wrong [with our

teaching]'. This perception of the abilities of the M.Ed. students by cooperating teachers, which is also shared by some school district administrators, is opposite from the perception of the M.Ed. faculty, who feel the M.Ed. students have generally been stronger both academically and in their student teaching than the undergraduates.

Discussion and Recommendations

The transition to graduate level teacher certification is now complete on the OSU-N campus. The last group of students to receive their certification in an undergraduate program have graduated. Many areas of concern that were discussed as the transition began never materialized. Other emerging aspects of implementing the M.Ed. program were totally unforeseen. One major concern involved sustaining an adequate enrollment in both the pre-certification and M.Ed. program. There was some trepidation that the cost of the fifth year of the program at the significantly higher graduate tuition level would send prospective students to other institutions where they could attain teacher certification in four years instead of five. Instead of having a marginal number of students at both the pre-certification and M.Ed. levels, enrollments for the current year are more than twice the projections, and at least as many students are expected for both programs for the next academic year as well. These higher than projected enrollments in the initial teacher certification programs have produced another concern, that of adequately staffing the Newark campus M.A. education program, as faculty loads are filled by M.Ed. courses alone.

Another concern involved M.Ed.'s prospects of finding teaching positions upon completing the program. There was concern that because M.Ed. graduates would command a salary at the master's level, administrators would prefer to hire graduates from bachelor's degree programs. This has not been the case. For each of the three years during which the undergraduate program ran concurrently with the M.Ed. program, M.Ed. graduates have had a substantial advantage in securing teaching positions, even though both groups were equally place-bound. Over the last three years, about one quarter of the traditional four year program graduates have secured permanent teaching positions, compared to over half of the M.Ed. graduates.

A possible explanation for the negative attitudes regarding the M.Ed. students and program expressed by some of the cooperating teachers may relate to the fact that school personnel from the area served by the Newark campus were not involved in any aspect of the planning for the M.Ed. program. The program was conceptualized and first implemented on the main campus. The Ohio State University has had a long-standing policy that requires regional campuses to offer education programs identical to those on the main campus. In developing the M.Ed. program, this 'one program, five campus' policy did not allow for collaborative input from Newark-area educators. Instead, the Newark campus adopted the program designed for main campus needs. School district personnel with no ownership in the

program may have found it easy to criticize. Furthermore, not being involved in program development may make it more difficult to recognize advantages a new program might offer.

An unresolved but critical concern is whether or not the M.Ed. program is attracting better qualified students and preparing higher quality teachers. This question will be the subject of ongoing research involving longitudinal studies comparing the success in teaching and career paths of graduates from the traditional program with M.Ed. graduates

Many other possibilities for continuing evaluation of the M.Ed. program exist. Will M.Ed. students continue to have a high placement rate into teaching positions? 1995 data from the Ohio Department of Education indicate that only 16% of graduates attaining elementary certification from Ohio institutions during the 1994-95 academic year found teaching positions in Ohio. The M.Ed. rate has been considerably higher than this figure. Even more important than teacher placement is the question of teacher quality. How successful will the M.Ed. teachers be? What paths will their careers take? Will they remain in the education field? Will they be more likely to engage in action research? To take continuing education course-work? These and other questions will need to be answered.

Further investigations can be conducted comparing the two different academic backgrounds of students that now will comprise each M.Ed. cohort. Beginning with the 1995-96 academic year, approximately one half of the forty-six students entering the M.Ed. program matriculated from the pre-certification program, while the remaining half hold degrees in fields other than education and therefore were not enrolled in the pre-certification program. These two groups can be compared both while enrolled in the M.Ed. program and after they have completed it and enter the teaching field.

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