

Development and Sustainability of School-University Partnerships in Special Education Teacher Preparation: A Critical Review of the Literature

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

Michael S. Rosenberg

Johns Hopkins University

Mary Brownell & Erica D. McCray

University of Florida

Laurie U. deBettencourt

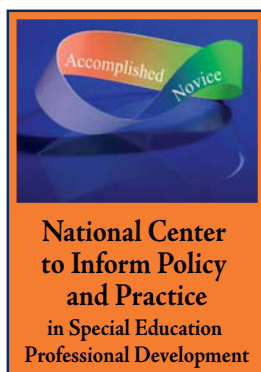
Johns Hopkins University

Melinda Leko & Susan Long

University of Florida

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National Center to Inform Policy and Practice
in Special Education Professional Development
1403 Norman Hall
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
PO Box 117050
Gainesville, FL 32611
Phone: 352-273-4259

<http://www.ncipp.org>

INTRODUCTION TO SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Local Education Agencies [LEAs] and Institutions of Higher Education [IHEs] work together in the initial preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers, although it is difficult to ascertain the number of LEA/IHE partnerships. These relationships typically allow for a leveraging of resources and expertise, achieving outcomes that would not be realized without cooperative involvement. This paper reviews extant literature on how partnerships between LEAs and IHEs influence the development of high-quality teachers, particularly special education teachers. The goal is to inform policymakers and practitioners of best practices for developing and sustaining LEA/IHE partnerships as a means of enhancing special education teacher development. Concerns over teacher education effectiveness—both at preservice and inservice levels—has led to greater attention to the role and promise of LEA/IHE partnerships. Teacher preparation through partnerships is conceptualized as an ongoing process that bridges preservice development, induction, and professional development. The paper discusses various operative definitions of partnerships, including goal-focused and structure-oriented definitions.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Partnership Types

Professional Development Schools [PDSs] are innovative partnerships between school districts and IHEs that focus on four primary goals: (a) the preparation of new teachers; (b) faculty development; (c) inquiry directed at the improvement of practice; and (d) enhanced student achievement.

Alternative Route to Certification Programs [ARCs] provide access to a teaching credential by circumventing traditional preservice preparation.

PDS partnerships embody the ideals of collaborative, career-long teacher professional development. ARC partnerships tend to be more pragmatic, typically centering on filling specific personnel needs, most often in subject areas of extreme shortage and in difficult-to-staff schools.

Literature Review

An electronic search of published literature from 1998 to 2009 using Google Scholar, ERIC, Wilson Web, and Academic Search Premiere databases with relevant keyword phrases was performed, and all articles with research components were reviewed.

Guiding Questions

This review was organized by guiding questions focused on assessing the impact of partnerships in the preparation of both general and special education teachers, specifically, effectiveness, characteristics, and contextual factors.

PDS PARTNERSHIPS

The comprehensive review of the general and special education PDS literature found an expansive literature with limited empirical outcome data. The general education PDS research base is more comprehensive than in special education.

General Education

Practitioners and policymakers have several reasons to be optimistic about the promise of PDS efforts for improving teacher education and schools.

Preservice and inservice teachers. PDS efforts show some potential for improving outcomes for preservice teachers, inservice teachers, and students.

Specifically, compared to non-PDS preservice teachers, PDS preservice teachers:

- reported feeling more knowledgeable and prepared to enter the teaching workforce, particularly when working with diverse students
- scored higher on measures of lesson planning, instruction, management, and assessment
- engaged in more effective teaching practices
- were more likely to remain in the classroom after their first year.

Inservice teachers gained access to what appeared to be effective professional development.

Students. PDS efforts had positive impacts on students' reading, writing, and math achievement as well as attendance rates and behavior referrals.

Partnerships. Contextual supports necessary to initiate and sustain PDS partnerships include:

- adequate time for collaboration
- reduced barriers to participation through incentives
- effective means of communication, conflict resolution procedures, and a culture of trust
- leadership at many levels (e.g., state, district, school)
- adequate and continuing funding.

Although the general education PDS literature provided some important insights, tight linkages have not been established between the supports needed for PDS work, how these supports foster key opportunities for participant learning, and how learning opportunities lead to critical outcomes.

Special Education

The findings from the general PDS literature undoubtedly are relevant for similar work being conducted in special education; however, special education presents some unique issues and challenges. Several studies provided varying forms of data that focused on either teacher or student outcomes.

Teachers. Teacher outcomes focused on preservice teachers' perceptions of how they benefited from PDS work and administrative and cooperating teachers' perceptions of their abilities. Preservice teachers felt better prepared to deal with issues of cultural diversity in the classroom and community. A healthy portion of research focused on positive changes in the perceptions of preservice teachers and their improved socialization in hard-to-staff schools. More research emerged demonstrating that teachers prepared in PDS efforts were more capable in their classroom practice. In several studies, perceptions that preservice teachers were better prepared to handle the demands of teaching were supported by the fact that partnership schools and districts tended to hire these teachers on graduation.

Students. Students attending PDS schools also seemed to improve on several important outcomes, including achievement, school attendance, and motivation; however, the data were not always disaggregated by special and general education. In four descriptions or case studies of PDS efforts, scores of students with and without disabilities on state assessments and curriculum-based measures improved steadily over several years. Reforms instituted in PDSs resulted in stronger student outcomes, both affective and academic; less is known, however, about the exact ways special education preservice teachers and students with disabilities changed.

Summary

Across both literature bases, common features characterized partnerships and contextual supports needed to sustain them. The most critical were:

- a collaborative context with blurred boundaries and new roles and leadership responsibilities
- full integration of coursework and field experiences
- involvement of preservice, inservice, and teacher educators in school-wide reform efforts
- the capacity to maintain funding and incentives for such resource-intensive efforts.

The most unique element of the special education PDS was the emphasis on preparing general and special educators to teach students with disabilities and CLD backgrounds. The involvement of special education faculty in general education efforts was limited. Compared to older reviews, more recent literature provided stronger evidence of changes in teachers and students. There is still much to learn about how specific activities and strategies embraced in PDS work influence the development of preservice teachers and student growth in these environments (particularly for special education teachers and their students). It appears that the combined efforts of university faculty, preservice teachers, and school personnel do enrich the school context through shared resources, collaboration, problem solving, and innovations that benefit students over time.

ARC PARTNERSHIPS

The characteristics of ARC programs—stand-alone programs and LEA/IHE partnerships—range widely from minimal emergency credential programs to well-conceptualized, labor-intensive, reflective efforts that integrate extensive coursework and field-based experiences.

General Education

Ideally, effective ARC programs carefully place well-educated candidates in supportive school settings with strong leadership and adequate supplies. This is complemented with carefully constructed coursework, and activities are tailored to candidates' backgrounds and current teaching situations. Finally, a well-developed mentor who is provided with adequate time, training, and resources plans lessons with the preservice intern, shares ideas, and provides feedback after frequent direct observations of teaching performance. Descriptions of ARC programs are frequent in the general education literature, but research in the area tends to be limited in both quantity and quality. Much in the literature regarding ARC partnerships between IHEs and LEAs is descriptive rather than empirical. Research has not determined whether ARC programs attract to teaching those who would not otherwise become teachers or whether those who do participate in such programs stay in teaching and promote student achievement. In ARCs, school placement context and its interaction with participant characteristics impact teacher quantity and quality outcomes.

Recognizing that these contextual elements are critical, it is striking that little information is provided on how IHEs and LEAs can work together to develop the infrastructure necessary for ARC improvement. Unlike PDS arrangements, this review found little definitive information on the resources and contextual supports that facilitate the initiation, maintenance, and institutionalization of successful ARC partnerships or the unique issues related to the development of such efforts. Only one paper highlighted how an LEA/IHE partnership can be successful in recruiting, preparing, and retaining alternatively prepared general education teachers. Much more needs to be known about how principles of LEA/IHE partnerships can be applied to the unique elements of ARC teacher preparation.

Special Education

Although the numbers of individuals seeking special education certification through alternative routes is increasing nation-wide, few empirical studies address the variables associated with special education ARCs.

Efficacy. Little attention has been given to efficacy beyond short-term studies of retention. Comparisons have been made between ARC programs for secondary teachers and special educators; but it has been argued that training secondary teachers requires emphasis on content mastery, while training special education teachers requires greater emphasis on pedagogical skills. Special educators must demonstrate mastery of their specialized knowledge and skills in actual school settings.

Characteristics. Reviews of special education ARC programs typically yield data on the existence of programs; design and implementation (including the length and intensity of programs); program characteristics (e.g., admission requirements, completion rates); and demographic composition of the candidates. Some findings from the reviews:

- Large numbers of ARC programs exist, especially in states that have critical shortages of special education teachers.
- Many ARC programs feature rapid entry into classroom teaching; yet a significant number do not provide adequate support for candidates (i.e., mentors or supervisors).
- Candidates are recruited widely and tend to be older, with equal numbers of males and females with bachelor's degrees. The majority of the candidates tend to be mid-career changers.
- Collaboration and planning among the stakeholders is an essential element.
- ARC programs, which are shorter, are similar to traditional teacher preparation programs in terms of coursework (often based on a state-approved curriculum); field placement; mentoring; and admission selection requirements.
- Extensive degree-linked ARC programs tend to be superior to programs that make use of unanchored courses or "add-on" activities.
- Mentors from within the school district or the IHE are recruited with few selection criteria, little training, no mentoring time guidelines, or specific supervision.
- Distance technology (e.g., audio/video teleconferencing) can be useful for teacher training in rural areas.

Nature. A partnership needs to be built on trust and an agenda that addresses mutual needs. For many LEAs, the greatest motivation to be involved in a partnership comes from critical shortages in the number and quality of their special education teachers. As with any partnership, the stakeholders must spend time making the partnership work. For example, in some ARC partnerships frequent discussions are needed to overcome past or current areas of mistrust and conflict. It takes time to hammer out specifics of trust, responsibility, and expectations. Each partner may need to change the way they did things traditionally. Both stakeholders may need to be involved in selecting key personnel. Program design takes time and effort.

Effectiveness. Whether ARC partnerships improve the preparation of special education teachers as measured by changes in teacher practice and improvements in levels of student achievement is unclear. In some ARC partnerships self-report surveys were conducted and compared to those completed by the traditionally trained students on variables such as self-efficacy, feelings toward mentors, teaching ability, or attitudes toward training programs. Preservice interns rated their own ability highly their first year but lower in subsequent years and felt they needed more mentoring than they received. LEA administration indicated increased satisfaction with teachers enrolled in an ARC program. Unfortunately, no outcome data on students of preservice interns in ARC partnerships were found.

Resources and Contextual Support. In most partnerships there are resources and contextual supports (e.g., leadership vision, reward structures) identified as necessary to initiate, maintain, and institutionalize effective partnerships. In this review of ARCs in special education, several such resources and supports became evident, including voluntary participation, motivated mentors, understanding of school context, and positive school climate. Ideally, university faculty members bring a theoretical and research-based perspective to the partnership that may not always be present in school-based decision making. School district partners bring the context and knowledge of the community, the school, and the students.

Summary

Partnerships between IHEs and LEAs to address special education teacher shortages are considered an alternative to traditional university training programs. ARC programs typically require both IHEs and LEAs to change the way teacher training is done (e.g., selection of interns, selection of mentors). The ARC programs that flourish tend to provide frequent monitoring and problem solving. Contextual supports (e.g., mentors, collaboration, supportive environments) are necessary for success. Like the PDS partnerships knowledge base, the ARC partnership literature has many limitations. Research-based linkages have not been established between the supports needed for ARC partnerships, how these efforts lead to opportunities for intern learning, and how such learning influences critical student outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Positive findings. In both the general and special education literatures there are clear indications that partnerships may enhance the efficacy of ARC programs:

- School context (where ARC participants are working) has the strongest impact on all outcome measures, Although not a direct indicator of an effective partnership, this finding supports the need for greater collaboration between IHE and LEA program providers.
- In special education, successful ARC programs had meaningful school-university partnerships with time allocated for collaborative activities.
- A few special education programs report limited positive outcomes (e.g., retention, measures of participant quality).
- Candidates who participate in ARC internship programs—typically partnerships between IHEs and LEAs—tend to remain in special education positions with greater relative frequency than those who participate in stand-alone LEA-sponsored programs.

Gaps in the knowledge base. The available literature indicates that PDS and ARC partnerships have some benefit for preservice teacher preparation, but gaps in the knowledge base still remain.

- There is no articulation of the ways in which teachers in general education partnership programs are prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities.
- Positive student outcomes demonstrated cannot be associated with changes in the practices of preservice interns, other changes in students, or other reform factors.
- Little is known about the learning activities provided in partnerships and how these are linked to student gains.
- Beyond limited anecdotal accounts, insufficient studies link partnership characteristics or contextual supports to partnership outcomes.
- It is unknown if some partnership supports (e.g., funding, leadership) are more important than others or whether all supports mentioned must be in place to foster an effective partnership.

Most educators have strong positive feelings about LEA/IHE partnerships, but paying for partnerships may be problematic in difficult economic times. School and university budgets are diminishing, and school personnel are overwhelmed by NCLB and IDEA

requirements. There may be little governmental support for the labor- and time-intensive processes associated with partnerships unless immediate student achievement gains can be produced. Some specific observations from the literature review:

- For education policies that frequently value content acquisition over the teacher education process activities (e.g., critical pedagogy, reflection, and mentoring) valued in partnerships, cost issues challenge partnership development and continuation.
- The development of partnerships may also be challenged by the new market-driven economy of teacher education in which traditional teacher preparation programs are being replaced by programs that focus on pragmatism and credentialism.
- When IHEs partner with a limited number of schools, there may not be sufficient opportunities for special education preservice interns to interact with special education teachers and students with disabilities.

Partnerships. Partnerships among IHEs and LEAs are repeatedly characterized as desirable, high-priority foundational activities. However, this enthusiasm is more a function of anecdote and faith than empirical data. Although the available literature indicates that PDS and ARC partnerships have some benefit for preservice teacher preparation, the quantity and quality of the research base does not justify the enthusiasm and rhetoric associated with these efforts. Appropriately designed outcomes research is needed.

Recommendations

This paper offers the National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development [NCIPP] the following recommendations:

- The current political and economic realities of special education teacher preparation should temper the often-idealized rhetoric associated with LEA/IHE partnerships. NCIPP can prepare a comprehensive, realistic start-up guide to partnership development with its requirements and challenges.
- There are insufficient studies linking partnership characteristics or contextual supports to partnership outcomes and no studies on the relative effects of these variables. NCIPP can be a platform for evaluating specific practices within partnerships.
- The lack of coordination among special education and general education partnerships is counterproductive to inclusive and standards-based education. NCIPP can develop field-based internships to promote stronger collaboration.
- Organizational structures that discourage LEA/IHE faculty members from participating in partnerships need to be countered. NCIPP can offer a forum for considering alternatives and successful case studies.
- The limited database on partnerships indicates that stakeholders need practical strategies for formative and summative data collection. NCIPP can provide templates for data collection and analysis.
- An important reason for the limited quantity and quality of research on partnerships is the difficulty of conducting thorough, well-controlled research on complex, multifactor teacher preparation reform. NCIPP can lead efforts to design and implement this research.