A Clinically Rich Residency Track for Teaching Assistants

Heather Reynolds
Leigh Yannuzzi
Tina Wagle
Donna Mahar
SUNY/Empire State College

Abstract

For the past four years our clinically rich residency program has been providing a unique track for Teaching Assistants (TAs) to complete their MAT degree. Our TA track addresses the national calls to increase clinical teacher training and recruit teachers from the communities where they live and work (e.g., Madda & Schultz, 2009). Our model removes some of the financial barriers for TAs through only requiring an eight week leave of absence from their position for them to earn their MAT. The program also provides the clinical training that is aligned with current best practices (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; National Research Council, 2010). In this paper we describe the development and implementation of our clinically rich residency program, more specifically, the TA track, while also discussing how we have attempted to address some of the best practices for clinically rich residencies, Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, and attracting a diverse, experienced teaching force. We believe that this program can serve as a model for schools of education that are focused on clinical practice, and who are committed to recruiting TAs who live and work in the communities that they serve to earn their Master’s degree.

Author Biographies

Heather M. Reynolds, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Teacher Education at SUNY Empire State College. Email: Heather.Reynolds@esc.edu.

Leigh Yannuzzi, M.A.T., is the Director of Teacher Education in the School for Graduate Studies at SUNY Empire State College and a doctoral candidate at SUNY Albany. Email: Leigh.Yannuzzi@esc.edu.

Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning
Volume 9, Number 2 Spring 2015
71
Tina Wagle, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Chair of Teacher Education in the School for Graduate Studies at SUNY Empire State College. Email: Tina.Wagle@esc.edu.

Donna Mahar, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of English and Literacy at SUNY Empire State College. Email: Donna.Mahar@esc.edu.

Introduction

This paper will highlight the development and implementation of a clinically rich residency program track for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at SUNY/Empire State College which was regionally piloted during the 2011-2012 academic year and ran as a statewide program in 2012-2013. Over the past four years our program has enabled a number of TAs to complete their Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree who would otherwise not have been able to leave their job to attend graduate school full time. More specifically, our program allows TAs to complete a year-long clinically rich residency program in the community where they live with only a minimal leave of absence from their job (eight weeks) in order to complete their teacher certification and MAT degree.

Our longer standing MAT program incorporates the Transitional B certificate where students become employed as the teacher of record after one year of coursework and matriculate for an additional two years of study and clinical experience. The more recent clinically rich program offers Initial Certification after the year-long residency is completed. As a result of the success of these programs, we are currently developing a combined BA/BS/MAT program that will allow for a continuous track from undergraduate coursework through the completion of the MAT program. Although not exclusively a program for TAs, it is our hope that this combined program will allow many paraprofessionals and TAs, who may lack adequate financial support, to have a clear track to completing their undergraduate and graduate degree, all while continuing to teach in their home schools. In this paper we will provide a review of the relevant literature that supported our program development as well as a detailed description of the TA track within the clinically rich residency program.

Literature Review

Clinically Rich Residency Programs

Over the past several years, there has been a call for increasing the
clinical preparation of teachers in the United States (e.g., Berry, Montgomery, Curtis, Hernandez, Wutzel, & Snyder, 2008; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; National Research Council, 2010). A report from the National Research Council (2010) identified the three critical aspects of teacher preparation that create positive outcomes for students as a) candidate content knowledge, b) quality of teacher candidates, and c) field (or clinical) experience. NCATE (2010) convened a Blue Ribbon Panel of experts in 2010 to identify the gaps between “how teachers are prepared and what schools need” (p. ii). The panel recommended an increase in clinical hours for teacher candidates and putting practice at the center of teacher education as is common in the medical field. It was noted that while the current focus of clinically-rich programs targets urban and otherwise underserved school districts, the panel argued that clinical practice is the best way to prepare all K-12 educators, and as a result teacher education programs across the United States have undergone revisions to include more clinical experience for pre-service teachers. Our program has continued to incorporate these, and more recent recommendations, including, the accreditation standards from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2013).

**Grow Your Own (GYO) Initiatives**

Coinciding with the growth in clinically rich residency programs, GYO programs have attracted interest as a way to recruit and retain high quality educators to teach in their own communities. The forms of these GYO programs vary widely, but the “central aim of GYO is to improve teaching and learning in high-needs schools by recruiting and preparing community-based prospective teachers, and returning them to their neighborhood schools to teach” (Madda & Schultz, 2009, p 204). The primary focus of GYO programs is to remove the barriers that keep individuals from low income communities from pursuing a teaching degree, including, a lack of adequate financial support, a lack of social support, and a lack of academic support (Madda & Schultz, 2009). The recruitment of teachers for GYO initiatives range from high school students who are interested in a career in teaching to Teaching Assistants (TAs) or paraprofessionals who are already employed in school districts (see e.g., Skinner, 2010; Swanson, 2011).

The promotion of a clinically-rich residency targeting TAs who have the desire and ability to transition to careers as certified teachers is supported by the empirical research base linking satisfaction in vocational interest and workplace environment to high levels of teacher efficacy and retention (Swanson, 2011). Teaching assistants know their schools, their students and their communities in a way teacher education can leverage by breaking down
barriers between these paraprofessionals and their attainment of teacher certification and an advanced degree.

The Need for a More Diverse and Experienced Teaching Force

Villegas and Davis (2007) clearly outline the strategies that need to be utilized to recruit an effective and diverse teaching force to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. They suggest that recruitment efforts have to be expanded "beyond those who are already enrolled in four-year colleges and Universities" (Villegas & Davis, 2007, p. 139) to include pre-college students, community college students and community residents, including, paraprofessionals or teaching assistants (TAs). At each level these recruitment efforts must include partnerships and collaborations with appropriate community agencies, financial support/incentives (tuition, grants, money for books and supplies), academic support (tutoring and writing assistance) flexible scheduling (Fluckinger & Thompson, 2000), and social supports (advising and mentoring) (Villegas & Davis, 2007). We will discuss how we have attempted to address some of the best practices for clinically rich residencies, GYO programs, and attracting a diverse teaching force as we describe the development and implementation of our clinically rich residency program.

Program Objectives/Overview

In response to these national calls for increasing clinical preparation, and recruiting a more experienced and diverse cadre of teachers to pursue teacher certification, the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at SUNY/Empire State College developed and implemented a clinically rich residency track for teacher preparation in 2011. By allowing our residents who are employed as TAs to remain in their home districts, our program supports the "Grown Your Own" (GYO) initiative to recruit teachers from their own communities in order to decrease the lack of connection between the experiences of teachers and the students they serve (Madda & Schultz, 2009). We have strong links with multiple school districts in urban centers across New York State where we work with the school and district administration to support TAs throughout the program. We have also been able to secure a small amount of grant funding to support the purchase of textbooks that were awarded to the fall cohort of TAs in 2014.

The TA track of the clinically rich residency program was designed as a two year program, with a three year option for those who felt they needed more time and support. During their first year in the program, TAs complete graduate level methods and pedagogy courses while maintaining their current employment within their home school district. The second year, TAs continue
coursework while also engaging in a year-long residency in their district with a critic teacher in their content area. During the residency year, beginning on the first day of school or during professional development days, TAs must be in their critic teacher's classroom one period per day. This arrangement continues into the Spring term, where an additional eight week immersion takes place. When the immersion is completed the TA continues to work in the classroom for one period a day until the end of the College semester (mid-May). An eight week leave of absence (LOA) is usually necessary to complete the immersion, where the TA takes over the critic teachers' full course load. This model allows TAs to keep their current salary and benefits while pursuing their Master's degree. The TA track discussed in this paper highlights an approach teacher education programs can take to support the certification and advanced degree attainment of TAs, even when outside funding is not available.

**Outcomes/Conclusions**

The following are two profiles of our graduates that were selected as models of the kinds of students who complete our program, while also exemplifying some of the factors that have led to student success in completing the TA residency track. Each case represents a different population that our statewide program aims to serve, although both were students who did not have the financial means to give up their jobs and attend a traditional teacher education program. TAs were interviewed at the end of their residency experience in 2012 about the strengths and challenges of the TA Track within the residency program and the following are summaries of the responses of two of our graduates (names were changed for privacy purposes).

Ama is a 33 year old African-American female who has been a TA in a high need urban district for the past 8 years. She lives in this community and does extensive community service work outside of the school. She found the TA track valuable because she could keep her TA position, while spending time with a critic teacher who was a content area expert. Balancing her job and coursework was challenging but she found that the value of the clinical experience coupled with support and guidance from graduate faculty made the experience worthwhile. This candidate felt very strongly about the importance of teachers coming from and understanding the communities in which they work. "Teachers who come from the communities in which they live are already stakeholders in their community. Assuming this role means they understand the needs of the population they are teaching. They have relationships with many of the families because they shop, worship, and live where their students live. Having such a strong connection encourages the educator to build
relationships, and make connections that can benefit their students beyond the four walls of their classroom."

Beth is a 47 year old White female who has been a TA for 13 years in a high need school district that has been identified as a “district in need of improvement” by the state. She has lived in this community for her entire life. She mentioned the challenge of balancing coursework and her job but also noted how she was able to put theory into practice by completing her course work while in the classroom. She said that knowing the routine, the kids, and the expectations before starting her residency placement made the process much more seamless. She commented that “working in your own community offers many benefits. Adults, students, teachers and administrators know you. You feel connected and part of a group. You want to help your community prosper and watch students grow and become productive people.”

Both of these TAs worked and completed their residency in the same community where they lived. One community is a predominantly White lower-working class community and the other community is a racially diverse urban community. Our program allowed these two TAs to successfully complete their Master’s degree with a limited LOA from their TA positions, while continuing to support themselves and their families, and maintaining their employment in the districts where they completed their residency placements.

Our program supports new approaches to teacher education, including, increased clinical experience for pre service teachers as well as efforts to recruit diverse and experienced teachers from their own communities. (e.g., Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013; Madda & Schultz, 2009; NCATE, 2010; NRC, 2010; Villegas & Davis, 2007). Our model removes some of the financial barriers for TAs to earn their MAT and provides the clinical training that is aligned with current best practices. Given the effectiveness of this model, we plan to increase enrollments of TAs in our residency programs through the development of outreach and recruiting efforts tailored to this unique group through the development of a combined BA/BS/MAT program that will allow students to plan for and begin their graduate studies while still enrolled as undergraduates.

Although still in the development stage, we believe that this new program will provide a clear and continuous pathway from the BA/BS level to the MAT level for many paraprofessionals and TAs who have not completed their Bachelor’s degree, while they continue to work in their schools. It is our hope that we will recruit larger numbers of TAs across the state with years of experience in K-12 schools, who will follow a clear and well supported pathway from the BA/BS level through their Master’s degree.
We also hope that our TA track within the residency program can serve as a model for schools of education that are focused on clinical practice, and committed to recruiting more TAs to earn their Master’s degree, who live and work in the communities that they serve.

References


