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The Principal's Role in Retaining Para Educator Turned Teacher: Hope for Increasing Latinas in the Teaching Force

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a qualitative study done on a group of Latina para educators turned teachers along the Texas-México border. The study focuses on the para educators turned teachers' perceptions regarding administrative support provided their first year of teaching. School administrators' perceptions of support provided to para educator turned teachers was also measured. Findings indicated a correlation among three factors: 1.) the amount of experience the para educator turned teacher brings to the classroom, 2.) the relationship with the campus principal and 3.) the relationship with campus colleagues. Para educators turned teachers have different needs than those of traditional first year teachers due to their previous experience in classrooms and schools. As a result school administrators must provide support designed to meet their unique needs and not generalize their needs to be the same as other beginning teachers.

"I'm so glad that I was a paraprofessional otherwise the first week would've scared me to death." [Para educator turned teacher]

Perspectives

Schools today are faced with the difficult task of attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers to staff their classrooms. The literature indicates that 30% of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years and 40% of newly qualified teachers aren't employed in the profession a year after they graduate. (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001). One of the main reasons teachers leave is the lack of support provided by administration (Certo & Fox, 2002; Ingersoll, 2001; Norton, 1999).

Our study sought to find out what was happening to a particular group of new teachers in their first year of teaching, para educator turned teacher (PTT). Our community university had graduated 25 Hispanic para educators from an accelerated teacher educator program. Seventeen graduates were hired by local school districts to begin their teaching career. Local school districts assumed responsibility for the induction support and retention of the teacher graduates. Our study focused on the induction year experience of the para educator turned teacher. Specifically, the study was interested in determining the support PTTs received from campus principals and how well this support met their needs.

Rationale for para educators turned teacher

A strong source for highly qualified teachers is the para educator ranks within a district. Para educators have been identified in the literature as a strategy to assist in alleviating teacher shortages as they are regarded as an untapped pool that shows great promise. (Darling Hammond, 2001; Genzuk, 1997; Haselkorn & Fiderler, 1996; Pickett, 1995; Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1996; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Benefits of looking to para educators as future teachers include their extensive experience in working with children; strong roots in the community in which they work resulting in more staying power; speaking the students' language and serving as a sorely needed language resource; understanding the culture and serving as a link to the community; and knowing teacher's work (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Genzuk, 1997).

Administrative Support Structures

School principals have been identified as having a key role in the support and retention of new teachers (Brock & Grady, 1998; Carver, 2003; Johnson, 2004). Studies have identified administrative practices through which support is given to new teachers to increase their likelihood of staying in the profession. Such administrative support practices include assigning new teachers expert mentors and facilitating the relationship (Brock & Grady, 1998; Hope, 1999; Norton, 1999; Shann, 1998); assisting new teachers in building strong collegial relations with peers (Hope, 1999); providing time and opportunities for new teachers to work collaboratively with peers on instructional matters (Certo & Fox, 2002; Kaufmann et. al., 2002); providing new teachers with a variety of resource personnel for support (Certo & Fox, 2002).

Administrative practices that lead to higher retention of new teachers also include establishing a professional culture that encourages teacher collaboration across experience levels (Johnson & Kardos, 2002; Johnson et. al., 2001); providing useful and sustained professional development opportunities at the campus (Johnson & Kardos, 2002; Shann, 1998); and developing policies or practices that support teacher work and creating an environment that treats teachers as professionals (Certo & Fox, 2002).

Method

Participants

Two populations were surveyed in this study, a para educator population and their respective campus administrators. The para educator population (PTTs) in this study

consisted of 17 FQEW graduates currently teaching in public elementary schools within the university's service area who volunteered to participate in the completion of a questionnaire and focus group sessions. The principal population consisted of 14 elementary school principals who supervised the PTTs. Principals volunteered to participate by completing a structured questionnaire and a scheduled semi-structured interview.

Data Collection

Structured questionnaires which allowed for open ended responses were distributed to para educators and to their campus administrators. The researchers attempted to determine the amount of support that administrators provided in the areas of planning, organization, discipline, and implementing classroom instruction.

On campus interviews were held with 14 campus principals and lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The structured questionnaire served as the interview protocol guide. Two focus group sessions were conducted with para educators at a centralized site. The group sessions were recorded through scripting and voice recording and lasted approximately an hour and a half in length. The focus group technique was used to gather data and insights from the PTTs that individual interview or surveys could not afford the researchers.

Data Analysis

The structured questionnaires, interviews and focus group notes and recordings were collected, transcribed and analyzed across one school year/two semesters. The researchers met periodically during the study to review transcribed data and discuss the coding of emerging themes and to validate the researchers' interpretations of what PTTs face during their first years of teaching. The periodic meeting of the researchers allowed for a peer check of their analysis (Carspecken, 1996).

The researchers were guided by qualitative methods to derive consistent, reliable, and valid analysis of data collected from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey instruments (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be mentioned. Our survey response rate was 47% for PTTs (N=8) and 50 % (N=7) for administrators. PTT participation during the focus group sessions was 47%. Consequently findings cannot be generalized to the larger population they can however, lead to further research.

Findings

Consistent with the literature (Shann, 1998; Shen, 1997; Hope, 1999; Norton, 1999; Ingersoll, 2001; Certo & Fox, 2002; and Johnson & Kardos, 2002) we asked administrators to identify administrative support in terms of time provided for planning and working with para educators, the availability of materials, the identification of a mentor teacher and assistance in working with children who demonstrate academic needs or behavioral challenges and amount of instructional feedback.

Principal Perception of Administrative Support for PTTs

Administrators characterized themselves as providing significant levels of support for their PTTs. They identified support for the PTTs in four areas: planning time, instructional materials, assigned mentor, professional development opportunities and valuing PTTs prior work experience.

Planning time.

Principals indicated opportunities throughout the day for planning with grade level teachers during their 45-minute planning period, grade level meetings and department meetings. They indicated that teachers were required to meet as a grade level once a week. Teachers they stated also had opportunities to discuss in the halls and during their lunch period. Multiple opportunities for teachers to interact with colleagues were provided by administration.

Instructional materials.

New teachers were allotted monies for basic materials. Those involved with federal programs such as bilingual or special education received additional funding. Principals mentioned providing guidance in the purchasing of materials. They also indicated that the PTT often brought their own materials into the classroom. In short, materials were adequate and far from limited.

Assigned mentor.

All of the principals surveyed assigned a mentor to their PTT. Time was allotted for planning as well as opportunities for the mentor to observe and provide feedback to the PTT. According to the principal responses, mentors provided assistance with lesson planning and curricular support. Principals however, were uncertain of the amount of time mentors and mentees actually met to discuss teaching. There appeared to be little to no follow-up regarding the mentor relationship or the amount of time actually engaged in dialogue.

Professional development opportunities.

All teachers were provided staff development on special populations and district initiatives such as Sharon Wells Math, Language Enrichment, Scientific Spelling and Crisis Prevention Intervention. Given that campuses were initiating new testing, principals indicated that all teachers received training on benchmark testing and academic standards. Administrators also provided PTTs the opportunity to observe other teachers on their campus.

Value of past work experience.

Principals also valued the PTT's past experience as one stated "The fact that she was a para educator who worked with special needs students in the past has given her an advantage." Principals also specifically cited new teacher in-services as support. These were provided by the district and were for the most part instructions on policies and procedures.

Perception of Administrative Support by Para educator

PTTs were asked to identify their perception of administrative support received in their first year of teaching in survey responses and focus group sessions. They too identified four sources of administrative support in the areas of time, instructional materials, assigned mentor, and professional development opportunities.

Time.

PTT responses indicated that principals supported them by providing time for them to meet with mentors, scheduling 45-minute planning periods and organizing grade-level meetings. PTTs also indicated time to attend conferences be it district or regional, workshops and other training sessions. Most of the training sessions were held off the campus. A small population of our sample indicated time was also provided to go observe teachers at other campuses and grade levels. Some PTTs indicated a desire for additional formal release time to observe other teachers on their campus and grade level. Other PTTs did not find value in time allotted for formal observations; they were disappointed by the skill level of other teachers. As one bilingual first grade teacher stated, "Since I was a para I would see a lot of teachers...I had seen really good teachers, really devoted teaches and I learned a lot from them so when I went there to observe I wasn't impressed. They weren't teaching like I wanted to teach...no new strategies."

Instructional materials.

PTTs indicated that adequate instructional materials were available through federal dollars or new teacher monies. Bilingual PTTs did indicate a lack of resources in Spanish, which is consistent with the bilingual education literature (Banks, 1989).

Assigned mentor.

PTTs indicated satisfaction with the working relationship they had with their assigned mentor(s). "My mentor observes me frequently and gives me a lot of feedback and advice." Another noted, "I meet with my mentor at least once a week and I am always able to talk to her whenever I need to. My mentor has really helped me and this has made my job easier and less stressful." While yet another commented, "My administrator provided me with a mentor. We also plan as a grade level. We have a great working relationship."

Many mentioned turning to teachers at their former campus that had helped them when they were para educators. A first grade bilingual PTT cited the teachers she used to work with as a para educator. "I go to my previous campus a lot because my girls are there.... and they'd say do you need anything and they'd ask when I started, what did I need, lesson plans? Materials?...."

Professional development opportunities.

PTTs indicated formal staff development was available to them as a first year teacher. However, in most cases training geared to first year teachers did not meet their needs. For example, sending a PTT to training on behavioral challenges was not seen as necessary. "I had experience in dealing with difficult students because I had been exposed to it as a para educator." PTTs expressed a desire for specialized training in areas that

would allow them to differentiate instruction to a greater degree.

Past work experience.

PTTs also discussed the value of their past work as a para professional as a support for their first year of teaching. "I remember one year they gave me a new teacher and I was put there to train her and I had to teach so she could watch me. She'd tell me "write down everything you did' so she'd have a schedule..." "Other teachers came to observe me and I taught them my strategies and the other teachers were 'wow I didn't learn that, I don't do that' I was surprised because some of them had been teaching for a year and some of them had been teaching three years and they didn't know." Another discussed validation from central office staff about her teaching, "She went to observe me and was very impressed with me and I told her I had been doing Math Their Way for 13 years she told me I could be one of the trainers because I had been to the original Math Their Way...I was one of the trainers."

However, PTTs also indicated a desire for more instructional feedback from administrators. One PTT stated, "What I would have wanted for myself since the first week is someone to go in there and tell me I'm doing ok. Now this late in time, February, I've done it wrong and I know I've done stuff wrong...."

PTTs also indicated bringing teaching materials from home "I had been a para educator for a long time so I had a lot of stuff that I had kept for myself...my garage is full of stuff."

Principals' Perceptions of Most Important Sources of Support for PTTs

When asked to identify the most significant areas of support provided to new teachers the principals stressed three things which were provided for new teachers. New teachers were provided opportunities for collaboration with staff by being assigned a mentor and provided grade level planning time with colleagues. And, principals felt that instructional feedback provided to the PTTs by the PDAS [the state's formal teacher appraisal system] was a significant source of support.

Collegiality

Principals elaborated on the importance of collegiality and the value of teachers sharing ideas amongst each other. One principal stated, "The team concept is really big. We encourage them to go to another grade level and observe." Another described the positive relationship with the mentor and the team. "The mentor in that grade level, they are so united. They plan every day together." Still another administrator noted "...support from administration is important but most important is interaction with other teachers especially those at the same grade level."

Past work experience as a para professional.

Principals acknowledged the past work experience of the PTTs in supporting their first year teaching. Almost all the principals surveyed indicated the expertise of the PTT in handling classroom management and discipline. As one elementary principal stated, "For the most part the PTT is familiar with student behaviors and what is needed to correct

negative behavior before it escalates to a full blown problem.” Another indicated that it was not necessary to focus on student behavior with PTTs, “I make sure new teachers go to behavioral conferences. She doesn’t have to go to any of those.” And finally another stated “When you see her you don’t think of her as a 1st year teacher because she is on the ball. She has got it together and she has the kids disciplined and everything.”

Principals valued the PTTs’ level of knowledge. “I hired an experienced teacher from another district and the para was able to do much more than the experienced teacher.” “They work with so many good teachers that they pick up a lot of good ideas.” “They have seen what works and what doesn’t. They use a little of everything and make it work for them.”

The PTTs experience provided them with realistic expectations about the teaching profession. As several principals noted, “No surprises.” “His experience as a para has helped him to become familiar with many aspects of the teaching profession.” “She had the advantage because she knew the school climate and the high expectations.” “They come knowing what to expect.” One principal commented that retention of PTTs may be higher than most new teachers. “The PTT is more likely to stay in the profession because they are aware of the demands of the job as well as all the ‘extras’ that some traditional students at the university may not be aware of.”

Sources of Support Perceived Most Important by PTTs

According to survey questionnaire and focus group responses a supportive work environment from colleagues was seen as most instrumental in supporting PTTs throughout their first year. “... having a good mentor at the same grade level is important and all the teachers are very helpful to me. If I had been isolated I wouldn’t have stayed.” “The literacy teacher is very helpful in reminding me of the many deadlines that need to be met.” “Other teachers are very helpful they share ideas.”

One PTT indicated strong disappointment with the level of team work and cooperation in her school. She stated “...when we plan they say we’ll just do this and this and they don’t plan like I used to co-plan with teachers as a para...so I’m thinking I’m responsible for my students ... I’d rather plan by myself.”

Barriers that Inhibit Support as Perceived by Principals

Based on principals’ responses barriers for para educators becoming certified teachers, included (1) the inability to transition, (2) envy on behalf of other colleagues, (3) lack of confidence, and (4) failure to pass the state-licensing exam. Specifically some principals indicated para educators might not be able to transition from a follower role to a leadership role given that they were used to “following the teacher’s lead.” One principal commented on para educators’ lack of confidence in their new role, “She doesn’t see herself as a teacher...” Another said, “...the only thing is, it’s taken her a while to make decisions. Paras are not as assertive.”

An issue that surfaced during interviews was the inability to transition into a new peer group as reflected in the following statement, “I could sense there was little bit of envy and jealousy.” Principals suggested remedying this by having the PTT move to a new

campus where they would only be known as a teacher and not a former para educator. A final barrier mentioned was the inability to pass the state-licensing exam. Two of the participants in this study had been unsuccessful in their first attempt. This seemed to have undermined their self-confidence; although both of their principals identified them as excellent teachers.

Aside from the four categories mentioned above, principals also made general statements regarding classroom management and lack of preparation for the workload. Principals mentioned paras had problems with discipline. This however, contradicted their earlier statements regarding the PTT's positive experience with discipline. Principals' statements seemed to be in general terms. They appeared to categorize barriers for all new teachers despite previously acknowledging the PTTs past experience as effective disciplinarians and not being overwhelmed by the workload expectations for first year teachers.

Barriers that Inhibit Support as Perceived by the PTTs

In survey responses PTTs did not identify any barriers. One stated, "I don't foresee any barriers that cannot be overcome. I was well informed before the school year of what they expected of me." Another commented, "I don't see any barriers. This is what I enjoy and this is where I will stay." Finally, one summed it up by saying, "Can't think of any. I love my job."

The focus groups however, revealed certain issues for PTTs. These issues however, are common to all first year teachers. For example, one teacher commented on the lack of help for special needs students, "I still need help with special education." Other's reflected on the difficulty of finding strategies to meet student needs, "It is hard to develop ideas off the top of my head I usually depend on ideas of other teachers." Other areas of concern were a change in grade level as well as, time constraints and paperwork. One bilingual teacher indicated "I wouldn't leave the job but leave the campus if they move me...they are probably sending me to third grade. I'd rather keep first grade." Another commented, "There is never enough time to get everything done, especially the paperwork."

Although PTTs brought a high level of past experience working with students they indicated a strong desire for affirmation of their teaching and instructional feedback as one PTT stated, "What I would have wanted for myself since the first week, is someone to go in there and tell me I'm doing ok. Not this late in time. I've probably done stuff wrong."

Discussion

Our research indicates a correlation between and among three factors 1) the amount of experience the para educator brings to the classroom, 2) the relationship with the campus principal and 3) the relationship with campus colleagues.

Amount of Experience

The PTTs in our study had a minimum of 10 years in the education profession. For most of them these years of experience were at the same grade level. This experience afforded them the opportunity to function in a variety of roles such as providing direct instruction, implementing behavior management and gathering data about student

performance through informal and formal assessment instruments. Consequently, the PTTs in our study did not report the usual problems reported by first year teachers such as classroom management, handling student conflicts, and feeling inadequate as a teacher (Brock & Grady, 1998).

Kaufmann et al. (2002) found that high standards and accountability created a sense of urgency among many new teachers and did not provide them with the support they needed to teach effectively. New teachers were consumed by the mad scramble to prepare day-to-day consequently they had little time or energy to reflect on their teaching practice.

The PTTs in our study were not consumed by teaching demands and were able to reflect on their teaching practices and identify areas of strengths and needs such as the teacher who stated, "I need guidance in selection of materials." PTTs were reflective regarding individualized instruction, the need to strengthen their "fun activities" and the need for staff development in the areas of gifted and talented and special education.

Unlike first year teachers who come into the profession with unrealistic expectations (Norton, 1999), the PTTs' past work experience provided realistic expectations about teaching and the profession. This experience provided self-confidence in planning and delivering instruction that may strengthen PTTs' resiliency. Bobek (2002) has identified resiliency as a trait in teachers who are retained in the profession.

The Relationship with Campus Principal

A primary reason that teachers give for leaving the profession is poor administrative support (Norton, 1999; Ingersoll, 2001; and Certo & Fox, 2002). It is when the principal's support and affirmation is absent that beginning teachers feel abandoned and lack the resources to succeed.

PTTs reported receiving support from administrators in the areas of collaborative planning time; assignment of a mentor; and provision of adequate instructional materials. However, PTTs felt that administrative support needed strengthening when it came to meeting the PTT's unique professional development needs and providing instructional feedback.

Principals highly valued the PTTs' work experience especially in the realm of classroom management. However, principals did not provide professional growth opportunities in such areas as differentiating instruction and adding more creativity to their lessons. Principals reported providing instructional feedback to the PTTs through the use of the state's mandated appraisal system. However, the state's appraisal system does not make a distinction between veteran and novice teachers' need for feedback. The literature indicates that new teachers yearn for ongoing observations and feedback but classrooms visits by administrators are limited (Johnson, et. al., 2001). The PTTs indicated a desire for such feedback as well.

Principals were ambiguous in terms of how they supported PTTs. Principals valued the PTTs' strength in classroom management that set them apart from most novice teachers and recognized them as experienced in this area. However, when it came to professional growth opportunities, PTTs reported attending new teacher general trainings (with the exception of classroom management) rather than instructionally specific areas

such as differentiating instruction. Principals may interpret strong classroom management as a sign of quality teaching and overlook the need to provide strong instructional feedback and affirmation of the PTT's first year of teaching.

The Relationship with Colleagues

The relationships that new teachers cultivate provide support networks that facilitate their transition into teaching (Bobek, 2002). Practices such as assigning new teachers to an expert mentor, assigning new members to work with a cluster of peers or assigning a variety of resource personnel to support new teachers exemplify systemic assistance retention efforts (Norton, 1999). These efforts included time to plan and develop lessons in grade level meetings, opportunities to observe other teachers and establishment of mentor/mentee relationships.

Strong collegial relations were a factor in PTT's reasons for staying in the profession. It is this interaction with colleagues that is a most valued form of "professional stimulation" (Shann, 1998, p. 113). More specifically, time given for teachers to collaborate on lessons, share materials and strategies and to discuss student work was given as a reason that PTTs continued in the profession.

Certo & Fox (2002) found that time given for teachers and staff to collaborate on lessons and units, share instructional materials and strategies and to discuss student work were given as a reason that teachers continued working in their school divisions. Providing time therefore, for new teachers to work collaboratively so as to avoid feelings of isolation leads to increased satisfaction with teaching and the profession as a whole (Brock & Grady, 1998; Hope, 1999).

Implications for Practice

Findings of this study led to multiple implications for administrative practice in supporting new teachers. Consistent with the literature principals must continue to support collegial relations by allotting time for planning and dialoguing about instruction, observing other effective teachers, and monitoring mentor relationships and recognizing the unique needs of PTTs by valuing the extensive school experience that is brought to their classroom teaching.

In order to provide appropriate support and direction, principals must know the specific needs of the PTTs on their campus. The needs of the PTTs differ significantly from those of first year teachers in that they do not experience classroom management difficulties, do not feel overwhelmed by the demands of the profession or struggle with day to day lesson planning. The PTTs are at a level that allows them to focus on individualizing instruction for their students. When planning staff development for PTTs, care must be taken to ensure topics meet their needs and develop PTTs to their full potential. PTTs ability to maintain classroom discipline may lead to the administrative assumption that they do not require extensive instructional feedback in their first year. This however, is not the case. Instructional feedback needs to be immediate and must be on-going to support and affirm the work of PTTs.

Additionally, principals must take care to ensure that their new teacher induction

program is structured and well organized to support the concerns of PTTs. Finally administrators must continue to encourage current para educators to seek certification. They must work with teacher preparation programs to create alternative pathways to teacher certification. One idea is for principals to allow para educators to leave campus early so that they may attend university classes. Para educators need positive reinforcement so they can be successful as both a student and campus professional. Principals play a significant role in enhancing the para educators' image as a teacher and encouraging them to continue their education.

Conclusion

Due to paraprofessionals' experience in working with children; roots in the community in which they work; speaking the students' language and knowing teacher's work, paraprofessionals must be considered as an attractive source for alleviating the teacher shortage. Their closeness to the community transfers into staying power and eliminates some of the teacher attrition rates so common in today's profession. In addition, given the new requirements for paraprofessionals in No Child Left Behind, principals should encourage their paraprofessionals to begin their teacher certification process or to complete the process.

Paraprofessionals may be viable sources to meet the growing demands for highly qualified teacher, especially in shortage areas such as bilingual education. As summed up by one principal, "Para educators are not likely to leave the profession because they have already been a member for so long. They like kids and the whole environment."

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