

Urban Specialists: A New Leadership Role for Talented Urban Teachers

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Abstract

As a result of a Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant, a university, school system, state department of education partnership have collaborated to develop an “Urban Specialist Certificate Program” that recognizes effective urban teachers, promotes their professional growth and leadership, and involves them in system wide leadership roles. This unique program, developed by an interdisciplinary team of university faculty from teacher education and arts and sciences, school system administrators, and community leaders is providing novice urban teachers and teachers in training with mentors at both the school and system level. With their enhanced knowledge of theory and practice, these urban specialists have been able to assume roles as leaders and change agents in promoting social justice.

Program Rationale

Many urban schools, even more than their rural counterparts, are plagued with issues that simply do not exist in suburban schools: high student turnover, high teacher turnover, low test scores, problems with discipline and violence that often thwart the learning of all students, difficulties in making connections between home and school, and many of the correlates associated with poverty. Teacher turnover rates in many urban, high poverty schools often exceed the reported figures of 50% (Ingersoll, 2001). Furthermore, due to high teacher turnover rates, there are often limited numbers of experienced faculty who are capable of or interested in nurturing novices. In some urban schools, the “most experienced” faculty member at a grade level or in a discipline may have two to three years of teaching experience. In other schools, the most effective experienced teachers are burdened with so many co-curricular or school leadership expectations that mentoring novices is not an additional duty they can add to their schedules (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Therefore, beginning teachers, many of whom are from backgrounds that have little resemblance to those of the students they are asked to teach, have limited access to positive role models and guidance in working with the diverse student population they are trying to teach. Unless a well-organized induction program is in place, novices struggle to survive on their own or with limited assistance. They also lack the leadership and support that they need to transition from pre-service to in-service teaching expectations. What is the result? High teacher attrition rates continue to negatively impact student achievement and to require the time and energy of faculties to recruit, socialize, and coach a steady stream of novice teachers.

In this partnership’s university preparation program, the majority of beginning teachers have traditionally completed their internship experiences in non-urban settings. They are most often assigned to schools where strong mentor teachers are available to guide their induction. We have learned that there are diverse perspectives among the university faculty as to whether or not placements should include urban school settings. For us, this is problematic because we know that most beginning teachers are often assigned to teach in high need schools and classrooms for their first teaching assignment. While an increasing number of preparation programs are including “urban” experiences and a focus on social justice in their pre-service curriculum, it is not a pervasive trend. This is due to a number of factors including faculty belief systems, proximity, accessibility, numbers of effective experienced faculty on urban school faculties to serve as mentors, and the desire to align pre-service placements with candidates’ desires. For whatever reasons, a large percentage of novice teachers continue to enter the profession teaching in contexts for which they were ill-prepared and, even worse, have little or no support to scaffold their induction into the profession. Without the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to serve as change agents in high poverty schools and needed support, there is little chance that novice or experienced teachers will be able to attain the legislated academic goals for *all*

children. According to a number of researchers, this requires a clear and in-depth understanding of the needs of students and a deliberate focus on social justice (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Howey, 2000).

The discrepancy between the learning to teach and beginning to teach contexts raises several issues that P-16 partnerships across the nation are realizing the need to address. First, it is critical to identify a cadre of strong “urban” mentors who can help universities prepare beginning teachers for the classroom realities they will inevitably face. This has traditionally been difficult to do when teacher turnover rates are so high that “experienced teachers” have barely achieved tenure status. Collaboration between universities and schools is needed to promote school cultures, particularly in urban schools, that build faculty confidence, competence, and commitment to the children and families they serve. Second, if educators are committed to “raising the bar” for urban student performance, there must be greater collaboration among educators from all fields in finding ways to improve both teaching and learning. This commitment extends far beyond providing in-service sessions. Instead, it means that school system leaders, school leaders, and university partners (with strong support at the leadership level) need to collectively assume responsibility for student learning and find ways to develop communities of learners who collaboratively find ways to overcome barriers to student achievement. Third, every urban teacher must develop an understanding of the needs of diverse student populations and the various avenues available to them to address these needs (e.g., classroom, community, special education, human services). Urban teachers, novice or experienced, must develop a repertoire of strategies that they can use to assure student success that extend far beyond their own classroom walls.

Talented urban teachers who possess the knowledge and skills to successfully challenge all students, work effectively with parenting adults, and access community based services when needed provide a tremendous resource for a school-based learning community. This community is essential for supporting novice and experienced teachers who are struggling to help urban children achieve their potential. If all beginning teachers were exposed to some level of urban experience, the transition between pre-service and in-service teaching would be more seamless. Even if pre-service candidates were only in an effective urban teacher’s classroom for a limited amount of time, it would provide them with a positive role model and first-hand insights into the potential that children in high need schools have for achieving and excelling academically. It would also give them first hand experience in understanding the need for them to participate as advocates for the success of all students who have the potential to become productive and contributing adult citizens of our society.

With the support of a Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant, a university, school system and state department of education partnership developed The Urban Specialist Certificate Program to address the challenges stated above. The program initially focused on developing a cadre of strong “urban” mentors who could help prepare and support novice teachers for the realities they will inevitably face in the classrooms within their schools. Over the three-year period of implementation, our partnership has learned, as research has shown, that with new understandings the program has been able to respond to ever changing needs through collective wisdom and enhanced competence. (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989; Isaacs & Benjamin, 1981). As this initial conceptualization became a program design, the focus evolved into creating a system-wide teacher leadership team of Urban Specialists who have coupled their effective urban teaching credibility with a sound knowledge of the research that supports their practice. The Urban Specialists are recognized by the university, school system, and community for their talents and contributions, used in numerous leadership roles, and viewed as important participants in designing school-based learning communities. They exemplify what Darling-Hammond (2003) calls “a valuable human resource for schools –one that needs to be treasured and supported” (p.7).

This paper delineates the development of The Urban Specialist Program, its theoretical framework, key components, qualitative and quantitative data related to its impact on teaching and learning, and lessons learned in this innovative journey. It is important to remember that The Urban

Specialist Certificate Program is still a work in progress. It is a description of a true partnership where collaboration, sharing responsibilities, and using research to guide the development of an innovative program has produced a product that has the potential to enhance both teacher induction and the culture of urban schools. Teachers, school administrators (school and system level), university personnel, and community members have all been involved in the collaboration required to design and refine the program. Their roles, voices, and perceptions provide the interdisciplinary perspective that has been the cornerstone of the program development.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

As university-based teacher educators, we have attempted to blend urban teaching realities and teacher preparation without compromising our beliefs in constructivist theories of learning, cooperative learning, and inclusion. We have collaborated with school system personnel to identify and implement methods that improve student outcomes in the bureaucratic context of mandated programs and curricula that do not always line up consistently with these theoretical perspectives. With these acknowledged points of dissonance, we forged the Urban Specialist program around a research-based understanding of urban teaching and teacher education. Sleeter (2001) notes that a link between theory and practice is made when programs emphasize school-university collaborations in program restructuring.

Effective teacher preparation for urban/multicultural teaching is more than an amalgam of knowledge and experiences. Urban Specialists need to possess the personal attributes that enable them to build relationships with urban children and their families (Haberman, 2000). They must possess self-awareness and cultural competence achieved through learning about cultures other than their own, challenging their own beliefs, and reflecting on their life experiences (Thorp, Evans, & Amenabar, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 2002). Understanding critical race theory, motivation theory, and change theory and engaging in self-awareness experiences are all critical components of programs that provide participants with a depth of cultural understanding of themselves and others in order for them to be confident and competent in multiple cultural settings (Ladson-Billings, 2000)..

Teaching in a multicultural context also requires instructional skill. Exploration of multicultural curricular and methodological development (Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998) leads to discussions of what to teach, how to teach, and who to teach whom. In an analysis of the research on urban multicultural teacher education reform, it becomes apparent that preparation or professional development programs that promote multicultural teaching and learning must integrate issues of diversity throughout coursework rather than “adding it on” (Zeichner, 1997). The development of culturally complete lesson plans (Voltz, Brazil, Wortham, & Cook, 2000; Howey, 2000) is just one example of many needed instructional skills. The Urban Specialist Program was built upon several frameworks. First, Bank’s (1995) dimensions of multicultural education directly addresses issues of social justice and equity. It includes content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture as part of the curriculum. Second, Bennett’s (1995) model emphasizes the same overall components and adds a focus on teacher selection and teacher decision making. Sears and Hersh’s (1998) Contextual Teaching and Learning Framework (building on students’ diverse life contexts, learning in multiple settings, interdependent learning groups, self-regulated learning, problem-based learning, and authentic assessment) provides a structure for teacher leaders to translate what they know about social justice into culturally relevant pedagogy for both their own classrooms and those of novices they are coaching.

Program Description

The Urban Specialist Certificate Program, one of the first certificate programs at the university, is an interdisciplinary program designed and taught by university, the partnership school system, and community partners. It resulted from approximately six months of planning and research that resulted in a conceptual model that included the following goals and objectives. Ongoing curriculum review and planning sessions, involving both feedback from and involvement of participants in the program, have facilitated program growth and refinement across the three years of its implementation.

The overarching goal for the program is develop a cadre of exemplary urban educators who can, in their roles as teachers, support the induction of novice teachers and serve as resources on urban education within their schools and across the school system. Additional goals include:

1. Understanding and acquiring leadership abilities and change strategies.
2. Enhancing their understandings and abilities to demonstrate an array of teaching/learning strategies or instructional models aligned with the needs of students and families in urban school communities.
3. Enhancing their ability to assess student learning and achievement.
4. Enhancing their ability to create effective partnerships among educators, with parents, and with the total school community.
5. Enhancing intellectual and reflective skills as an educator committed to professional growth and renewal.

Specific objectives for the program were developed to guide instructors' planning for the strands and to clarify expectations for the Urban Specialist candidates. The objectives focused on strengthening teacher leaders':

1. Knowledge of theory and research that supports their effective practice in urban schools
2. Knowledge of effective practices to improve student learning in specific content areas
3. Ability to demonstrate effective practice in urban schools and document its impact on student learning
4. Observe needs and provide appropriate follow up
5. Ability to accommodate the diverse needs of students in urban settings
6. Use of technology to improve student learning in urban setting
7. Effectiveness in working with families, other significant caregivers, and the community
8. Knowledge of services available to assist educators in meeting the diverse needs of students and ability to make connections with them
9. Ability to formally share what they know about urban issues; teaching and learning; using technology; and addressing the diverse needs of students and families in urban schools.
10. Skills in building trusting relationships and collaborating with team members in inducting novice teachers which builds upon varied strengths and competencies of the team members.
11. Understanding of ways to establish inclusive relationships throughout the school community.
12. Practice of intellectual dialogue and reflection.

Four courses were designed to achieve these desired outcomes. They focus on understanding issues in urban schools and communities, improving teaching and learning in urban schools, accommodating diverse student needs in urban classrooms, and using action research to improve

teaching and learning in urban contexts. As part of the unique design of the coursework, eight strands were developed that are taught simultaneously across the four semesters. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the strands. The first year (two semesters) coursework focuses on the teachers' own performance and school contexts. During the second year, the emphasis broadens to include developing strategies and tools to facilitate the induction of novice teachers. Embedded in all strands and courses is a strong emphasis on cultural awareness, social justice, advocacy for change, and performance-based assessments.

The selection process developed for this program requires that participants complete applications, submitted letters of recommendation, and participate in interviews conducted by a team of university and school system leaders as well as community leaders. Teachers are selected based upon established criteria that includes cultural effective classroom performance, student achievement (where student achievement data were available), cultural sensitivity, and willingness to serve as change agents. Interviews focus on potential participants' belief systems, commitment to urban schools, and leadership.

Coursework. This collaborative design of the coursework is reflected in numerous unique aspects of the program: scheduling of classes (summer workshops, weekend seminars, monthly sessions, electronic portfolios); involvement of a diverse faculty including indigenous community leaders; and "strands" of issues, topics, and skills threaded across the four courses comprising the certificate. It demonstrates our collective belief that if we are committed to "raising the bar" for urban student performance, there must be greater collaboration among educators at all levels and leaders in the community in finding ways to improve both teaching and learning. All urban teachers and teacher educators must be committed to increasing their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and demonstrating its application in their work with children and their families. Although we recognize that developing competence is an evolving process, we believe that university faculty and teacher leaders must be able to demonstrate and model this understanding for others. Urban teachers, novice or experienced, must understand that learning is continuous and that they must find ways to develop a repertoire of strategies to assure the success of students at any stage on the continuum of growth. We further believe that teacher leaders, who traditionally have just assumed the role of mentoring novice teachers, must have the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be able to scaffold the induction of novices in ways that assure their success in helping urban children achieve their potential.

Figure 1 details the Urban Specialist coursework strands (culture of the classroom, school, and community; working with families and caregivers; linking with human service agencies and community support systems; instructional improvement; teacher leadership; reflective practice; and teacher as researcher) and major components for each. All faculty use the Contextual Teaching and Learning Framework (Sears & Hersh (1998) to guide their planning efforts. All assignments for the program embed what is being learned in the Urban Specialist's own teaching contexts. They learn new theories and practices, apply them in their classrooms, and reflect on their experiences both individually and collectively. The Urban Specialists, in designing and refining lessons or in conducting inquiries and action research use the framework as their guide.

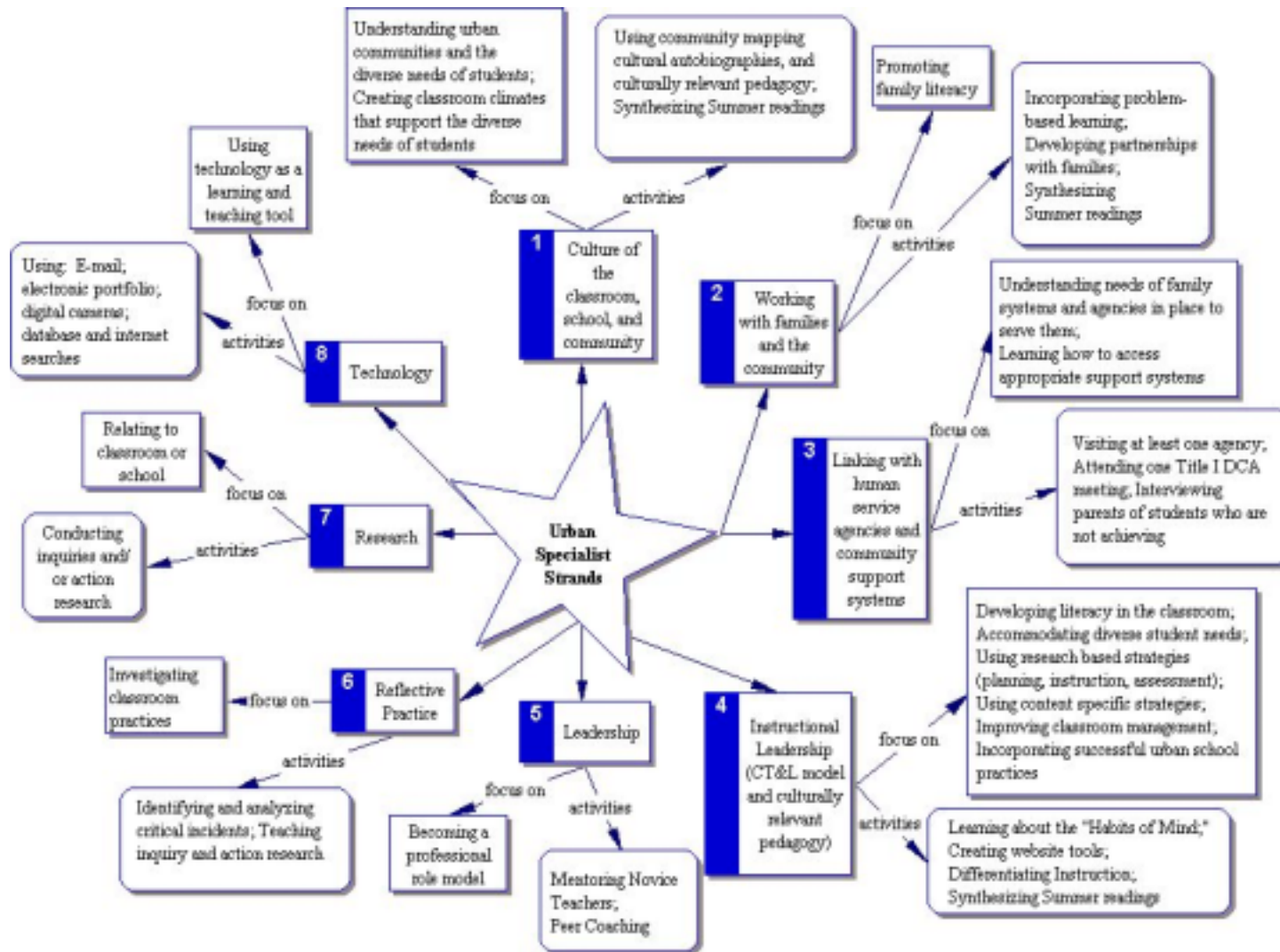


Figure 1. Urban Specialist Strands

Structure. The Urban Specialist program incorporates twelve hours of university credit distributed over a two-year period in a cohort model. Attempts were made to have a balance of school levels (K-12) and content areas as well as at least two participants from each urban school to support each other. Participants engage in two summer institutes as well as seminars and class meetings throughout each of the two years with a total of 100 contact hours per year. The courses created for the program can be used in partial fulfillment of a higher degree requirement. Table 1 illustrates the structure of the two-year program.

Table 1. Urban Specialist Schedule of Coursework.

Year 1:		
	Course	Contact (Total – 200 hours)
Summer Institute		5 days - 30 hours
Fall Semester	Understanding Issues in Urban Education	Monthly class meetings; Friday/Saturday seminars – 70 hours
Spring Semester	Improving Teaching and Learning in Urban Contexts	
Year 2:		
Summer Institute		5 days, 30 hours
Fall Semester	Accommodating the Diverse Needs of Urban Students	Monthly class meetings; Friday/Saturday seminars – 70 hours
Spring Semester	Action Research to Improve Student Achievement	

Urban Specialists are introduced to and encouraged to incorporate culturally relevant methods of teaching such as contextual teaching and learning. Activities of each cohort are designed to prepare these highly effective teachers to become equally as effective as mentors to novice teachers. By understanding their own practices and the actual research behind what makes them effective, they become better equipped as instructional leaders and as mentors.

Prior to the summer institute an orientation session is held to: introduce cohort members and faculty to each other, provide an overview of the program and coursework, allow participants to complete pre-assessments, and teach participants to use the electronic portfolio. The summer institute provides an opportunity for participants to focus on urban issues, learn from national and local leaders, and allow interaction across cohorts, with administrators, and with system and university personnel. As part of the first summer institute, Urban Specialists conduct mapping exercises in their own community school areas to learn about the strengths and challenges of the community; while during the second summer they conduct mapping exercises to find ways to incorporate the community as part of their instruction. The first two summer institutes (2001 & 2002) were held on five consecutive days toward the end of July. Due to feedback from the cohorts, the third summer institute (2003) was held as two days at the beginning of June and three days toward the end of July. This change in venue allowed the teachers to read and reflect upon assigned books in June and July and discuss how

they impacted their beliefs and attitudes regarding instruction in urban schools during the July sessions. Urban Specialist readings included works from Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994; 2001) *Dreamkeepers* and *Crossing Over to Canaan*, Lisa Delpit (1995) *Other People's Children*, Janice Hale (2001), *Learning While Black*, and Partick Finn (1999) *Literacy with an Attitude*.

Figure 2 displays the Urban Specialist coursework objectives and activities for their first year in the program. Specifically, the first year coursework focuses on objectives that relate primarily to each Specialist's own classroom. They are asked to conduct inquiries designed to study the impact of interventions on student achievement; complete and discuss readings; and begin mentoring novice teachers. Examples of teacher inquiries include studying the impact of using graphic organizers in content areas (i.e., math and science) and improving parent communication (i.e, with agenda notebooks). Figure 3 displays the Urban Specialist coursework and activities for their second year in the program. The second year of coursework expands upon the first year objectives and relates to the Specialists' classrooms and schools, and to their ability to coach colleagues (e.g., novice teachers and interns). Examples of action research conducted during the second year of coursework included the impact of community mapping on school culture, mentoring strategies used to induct novice teachers, and the impact of graphic organizers. The Urban Impact website (http://www.outreach.utk.edu/urban/urban_specialist/specialists.htm) includes links to inquiries, action research, and lesson ideas created by each cohort.

Urban Specialist – Year One Coursework Objectives	Year One Activities – Participants:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understand the needs of urban students, families and community members; ▪ Develop competence in using technology to improve student learning; ▪ Incorporate culturally relevant teaching; ▪ Expand each Specialist's repertoire of research-based and culturally relevant teaching strategies (e.g., contextual teaching and learning); ▪ Use "critical friends" protocols as a means for problem solving and curricular and instructional improvement; and ▪ Develop competence and confidence in researching the impact of teaching on student learning and motivation to learn. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apply coursework to their own classroom ▪ Complete a series of readings by leaders in the field of education ▪ Research their own practice Videotape their practice and evaluate it with the state Framework for Evaluation (Framework includes 6 domains: planning, engaging all students, assessment, effective learning environment, professional development, and communication) ▪ Analyze critical incidents (Annenberg Critical Friends protocol) ▪ Provide colleagues with feedback regarding instructional materials (Annenberg Charette) ▪ Become a member of their schools' mentor core teams and take the Tennessee State Department of Education Teacher Induction and Mentor training (designed by Urban IMPACT)

Figure 2. Urban Specialist Year One Coursework Objectives and Activities

Urban Specialist – Year Two Coursework Objectives	Year Two Activities – Participants:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop strategies to differentiate learning opportunities to address the diverse needs of urban students; ▪ Use the action research process to improve student learning; and ▪ Develop a repertoire of materials and strategies for mentoring novice teachers using the knowledge (urban issues, research, culturally relevant teaching strategies), and skills (inquiry, action research, technology, differentiating instruction) developed as part of the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apply coursework to their own classroom and school ▪ Continue reading from the Urban Specialist and Mentor team library ▪ Research their own practice (year-long process) ▪ Coach novice teachers in the use of the Critical Friends Protocol and Charette ▪ Write critical incident case studies to be used in school-based problem solving ▪ Serve on Mentor Core Teams

Figure 3. Year Two Urban Specialist Coursework Objectives and Activities

Participants. Participants comprising the population for this study include three cohorts of Urban Specialists. Cohort 1 (C1) began with 25 teachers and 19 completed the program in May 2003. Cohort 2 (C2) began with 16 teachers and is scheduled to graduate 12 Urban Specialists in May 2004. Cohort 3 (C3) began with 16 teachers, 14 of whom have remained in the program and will finish in May 2005. For those leaving the program, the following reasons were cited: personal (3 - marriage, divorce, moving); teaching or leadership demands (2); demands of program (4); health (2); and misalignment of program with career path (1).

Data Sources and Methodology

Purpose. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of: 1) coursework on the Urban Specialists’ own teaching in urban schools (e.g., incorporating culturally relevant teaching methods such as contextual teaching and learning, community mapping, differentiated instruction); 2) coursework and experiences in the Urban Specialist Program on the Urban Specialists’ ability to mentor novice teachers; 3) action research applied in the Urban Specialists’ own classrooms (pedagogy and technology) in promoting the academic and social performance of students in their classes (e.g., achievement, behavior); and 4) technology-based instruction (Course Info, Urban Impact Website, electronic portfolio development) on the Urban Specialists’ own learning.

Instrumentation. A case study methodology was used to study the Urban Specialist Program. As such, the study incorporated a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques, including the following:

1. Urban Specialist Certificate Program: Participant Questionnaire – This questionnaire was given at the beginning of each cohort’s program to gather baseline data about their needs and strengths.
2. Interviews - Each participant has been or will be interviewed individually or as part of a focus group (6-8 teachers grouped by elementary, middle, or high school level) at the end of the program regarding his/her experiences in the program. Interviews include participants’ perceptions of: a.) the impact of the program on the culture of their urban school, b.) the impact of the program on their own professional teaching growth and renewal, and c.) their ability to mentor novice teachers in urban settings.
3. Urban Specialist Program: Year One Formative Assessment – This instrument is completed at the end of the participant’s first year in the program to assess the impact of the first year and to help determine the direction of the second year of the program.
4. Computer-Experience Inventory – This is given at the beginning and towards the end of each cohort’s experiences in the program to determine the impact of technology-based instruction on teaching and learning (website, course info, applications to own teaching).
5. Professional Beliefs About Diversity Scale – This instrument is used to help determine the participants’ multicultural awareness/competency. It is given at the beginning and end of the program. (Poban & Aguilar, 2001)
6. Personal Beliefs About Diversity Scale - This instrument is used to help determine the participants’ multicultural awareness/competency. It is given at the beginning and end of the program. (Poban & Aguilar, 2001)

Results

1. Urban Specialist Certificate Program: Participant Questionnaire

A total of 56 teachers (25 – cohort one, 15 - cohort two and 16 - cohort three) completed the Urban Specialist Certificate Program Questionnaire at the beginning of their program. Content analysis procedures were used to categorize the responses. This information was used as baseline data for each cohort. The most frequently mentioned responses for each question are described in Table 2 (the number and percentage of responses are included).

Table 2. Urban Specialist Participant Pre-Assessment Questionnaire.

Question 1 – What do you believe are the most critical issues facing teachers in urban schools?		
Response	Number (n=56)	Percent
Lack of parent involvement	19	34
Discipline/classroom management	17	30
Lack of understanding of the diverse needs of students	11	20
High rate of teacher stress/burnout	7	13
Question 2 – What do you believe are the most critical issues for you in your own classroom?		
Response	Number (n=56)	Percent
Dealing with student apathy	20	36
Pressure for students to perform tests	11	20
Differentiating instruction	10	18
Lack of parent involvement	9	16
Time issues	8	14
Question 3 – What issues related to urban education are you most passionate or knowledgeable about?		
Response	Number (n=56)	Percent
Varied ways of developing student talent	9	16
How to work with “difficult” children	9	16
Question 4 – What issues are you passionate about, but want more information or more experience understanding?		
Response	Number (n=56)	Percent
Parent/family involvement	13	23
Using technology more effectively	9	16
Differentiated instructional strategies	7	13
Question 5 – What specific experiences, knowledge, or skills do you hope to gain from the Urban Specialist program related to:		
Response	Number (n=56)	Percent
<i>Instructional strategies</i>		
• Innovative strategies for reaching resistant learners	11	20
<i>Accommodating diverse student needs</i>		
• Modification techniques	12	21
• How to work with children’s prior knowledge (work with culture/community)	9	16
<i>Fostering self-regulated student behavior/classroom management</i>		
• Strategies for helping students take responsibility for their own learning	16	29
<i>Assessment Strategies</i>		
• Alternative assessments	25	45
<i>Community Connections</i>		
• Promoting parent involvement	11	20
<i>Relationships with human service agencies and legal services</i>		
• Information regarding what services are accessible to students and their families	14	25
• How to increase communication between schools and social service agencies	10	18

2. Interviews

A total of 18 teachers from the first cohort were interviewed about their experiences in the two-year program. Interviews will be held with each graduating cohort, which limits this study to only Cohort 1. Table 3 displays key patterns from their responses.

Table3. Urban Specialist Cohort One End of Course Interview.

When you think about your experiences in the program, what are things that stand out?		
Response	Number (n=18)	Percent
Met other urban teachers	14	78
Influence of specific individuals	14	78
Action Research	4	22
What do you consider as the most positive elements of the program for you?		
Response	Number (n=18)	Percent
Community mapping	14	78
Guest speakers/variety of speakers	9	50
Learned new instructional techniques	7	47
Faculty collaboration	6	33
What were elements that were least positive?		
Response	Number (n=18)	Percent
Organization	15	83
Communication	3	17
Heavy coursework	3	17
Need for technical training	2	11
Have you noticed any changes in the culture of your school as a result of your participation in the program?		
Response	Number (n=18)	Percent
Receptive faculty	9	50
Changes classroom practices	5	28

The following comments illustrate identified themes and patterns. For this study they fall into three categories.

Category 1. Ways that the Urban Specialist program impacted their practice.

“Increased my awareness of the issues of urban educators and pre-service teachers, specifically the commonality and the differences of the communities in which we teach.”

“I have a firmer knowledge base as it relates to urban education. I also have the skills to conduct action research related to improving my own practice.”

“It encouraged me to try new ideas/strategies. More than that, it made me realize the importance of evaluating what I do. It also has been the primary reason I have become more involved in my school.”

“I look for research-based strategies to use in my classroom and I document the impact of new strategies (collect and analyze data) on student achievement. It has empowered me to take leadership roles and act on new ideas.”

“It has heightened my awareness of my job as an urban teacher. I feel more equipped and more valued as a professional. I believe that I am treated more like a professional. I am department chairperson now and I am better trained to do the job.”

“I am more intentional about the way my classroom works from organization to student responsibilities to lesson planning. In addition, I have a better set of skills for finding resources to support what goes on in my classroom. I will and have been able to point other educators in my setting toward those resources as well.”

Category 2. *Ways that the Urban Specialist program impacted their relationships with other educators.*

“I use my urban experience to share ideas with other educators. I find my experience helpful in sharing with new urban teachers. Another key element of the program is the friendships and professional contacts I have made at UT and in other urban schools.”

“It gave structure and methods for mentoring pre-service teachers and new teachers.”

“I work more with another Urban Specialist from my school. We plan and strategize together. We are beginning to include others in our ideas.”

“I have learned from and shared ideas with colleagues. I participate in mentoring novice and veteran teachers and share knowledge with confidence and enthusiasm.”

“My colleagues are more willing to ask for advice or simply direction from me. They value my opinion and that feels great!”

“I am more thoughtful with the ways in which I interact with other professionals, students, and families.”

Category 3. *Ways that the Urban Specialist program impacted their relationships with students and families.*

“I feel I have a better understanding of the struggle urban parents have that are living in poverty.”

“The program stressed the importance of making the effort to get to know our students and the communities in which they live through community mapping. It gave me the encouragement to reach out to parents in a positive way. It reaffirmed the importance of building a relationship between students and their coursework.”

“It helped me understand the community in which they live. I found that it was important to put my own influences aside and accept/understand their viewpoint, a different cultural lens.”

“The speakers and the reading material from the program helped me to better understand my students and the community as a whole. Especially the community mapping piece. The masters’ program really is the icing on the cake, because it made me revisit my teaching techniques and strategies. The action research allowed me to be an actual researcher in my own classroom where it really counts. That is what a true professional does. She is a life-long learner and constantly changes her methodology with the climate to ensure learning is really taking place and that her students’ lives are impacted by her in a positive way. It has really enriched my personal and professional life.”

“I can see more clearly my role as one of many professionals providing care and services through a larger network of systems supporting families. I am encouraged about the way we do, can, and should work together.”

Category 4. Ways that the Urban Specialist program impacted teaching and learning.

Only six of Cohort 1 Urban Specialists were teaching at grade levels and in subject areas that provided standardized test student achievement. In order to determine impact on student learning for the entire cohort, each were asked to share their perceptions of the impact. Of the responses, the following are quite typical.

“During the Urban Specialist Program, I began working with a colleague who also teaches seventh grade math. We plan and strategize together. We create graphic organizers to help students understand concepts. We develop assignments and tests based on (one professor’s) interpersonal reinforcement theory, a strategy we learned in the program that actually gets students to choose to do more problems. In addition, we systematically prepare for standardized tests. We look at the state performance indicators, the school district’s curriculum guide, and our resources to determine the best use of our time to prepare our students for the test while not compromising student learning. We enjoy working together to make each other better teachers. Now that we are seeing a lot of success, we are sharing our ideas with other teachers in our building and district.”

Prior to entering the Urban Specialist program, I was a conscientious teacher. I read the most current books and research to ensure I was giving the students in my classroom the very best opportunities to learn. I included differentiation to make sure I was teaching the child, not the group. However, I was missing a vital piece—the research to either support or refute my effectiveness. Through the components in the program including the use of inquiries, action research, critical incidents, and LOTS of reflection, I have gained that missing piece.

“The first inquiry I did changed my approach to improving learning in the classroom. The inquiry involved using student-generated rubrics to improve creative writing. I always believed that students were more apt to learn when given control of the learning. I did not realize how distorted their perception of learning or achievement could be for a task. Before my intervention I asked the students to rate their writing on a scale of 1-4 according to standards they had created to form a rubric (1=lowest, 4=highest). All felt their work was worthy of a 4. On the other hand, I felt four were working at a level 2,

four at a level 3, and three at a level 4. In reality, all were working at a level 1! By the end of the inquiry, all the children were clear on the expectations for making a 4 on their writing, all the children could "grade" their own piece of work using the student-generated rubric, and all the children were eagerly attempting a 4! As a result of the work I did in the Urban Specialist program, my students were stimulated to learn at a higher level than ever before. I sent children to 2nd grade who were already writing better than most third grade students."

3. Urban Specialist Program: Year One Formative Assessment

Cohort one (n=16) and two (n=13) completed a comprehensive formative assessment at the end of their first year in the program. They were asked to rank their experiences to specific aspects of the course using the question, "Did the following components of the first year courses (and the way that they were organized/structured) facilitate your learning and/or progress in the courses?" Figure 4 and Figure 5 display cohort one and two's respective perceptions of specific strands/experiences of the course. Figure 6 and Figure 7 display their perception of course communication.

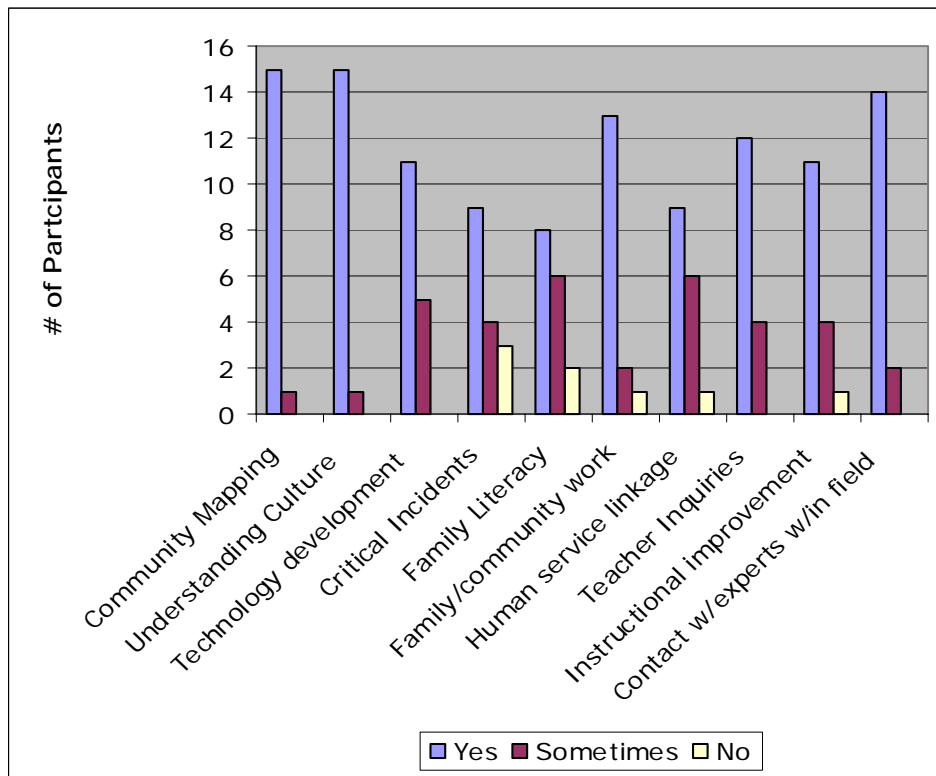


Figure 4. Cohort One Strands/Experiences – Formative.

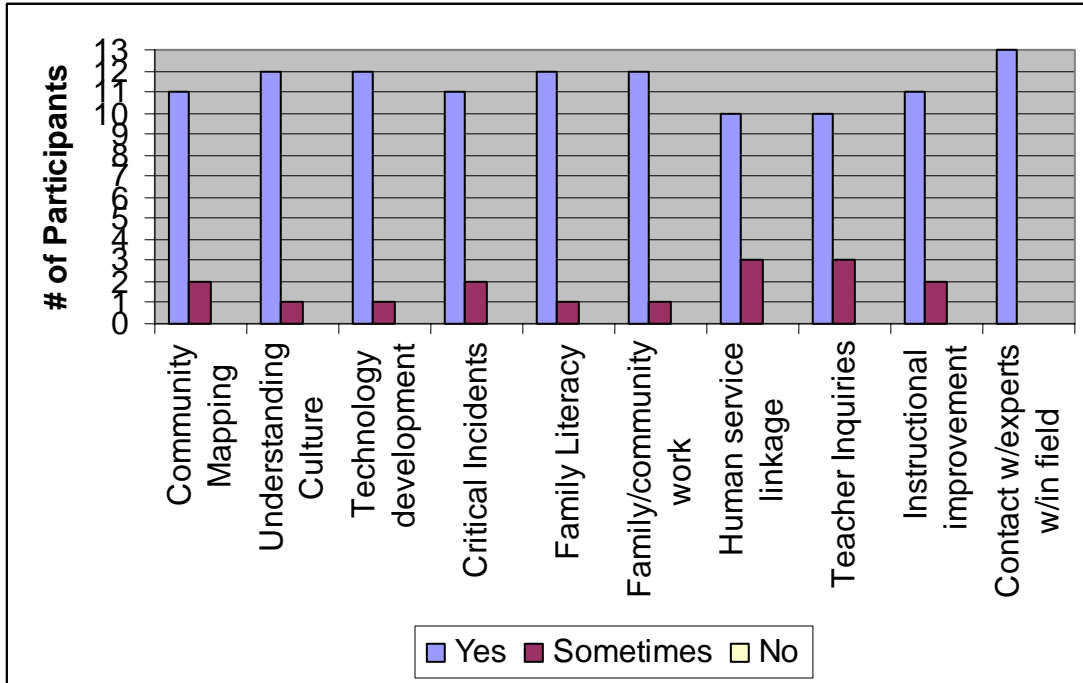


Figure 5. Cohort Two - Strands/Experiences - Formative.

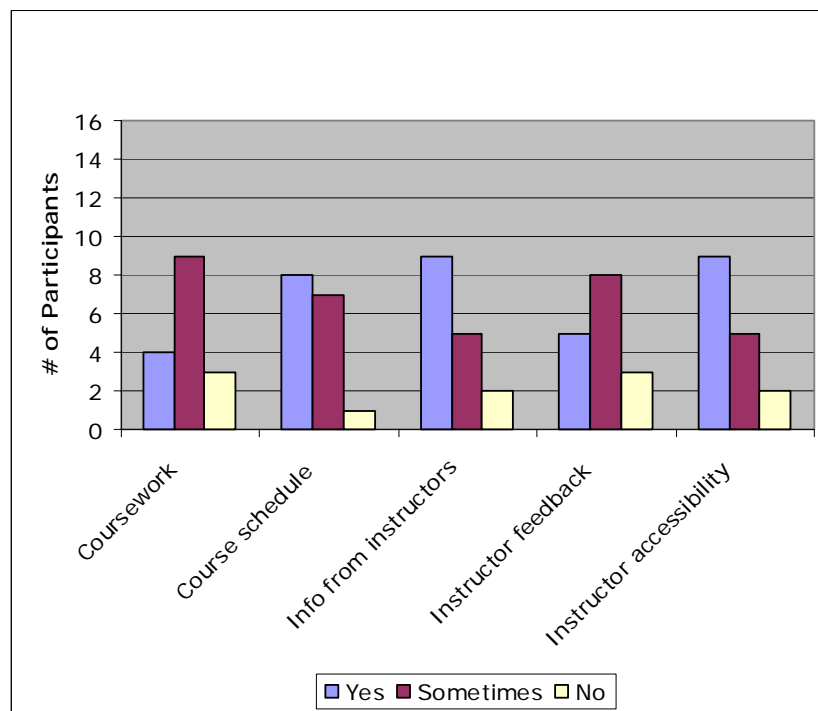


Figure 6. Cohort 1 - Communication - Formative.

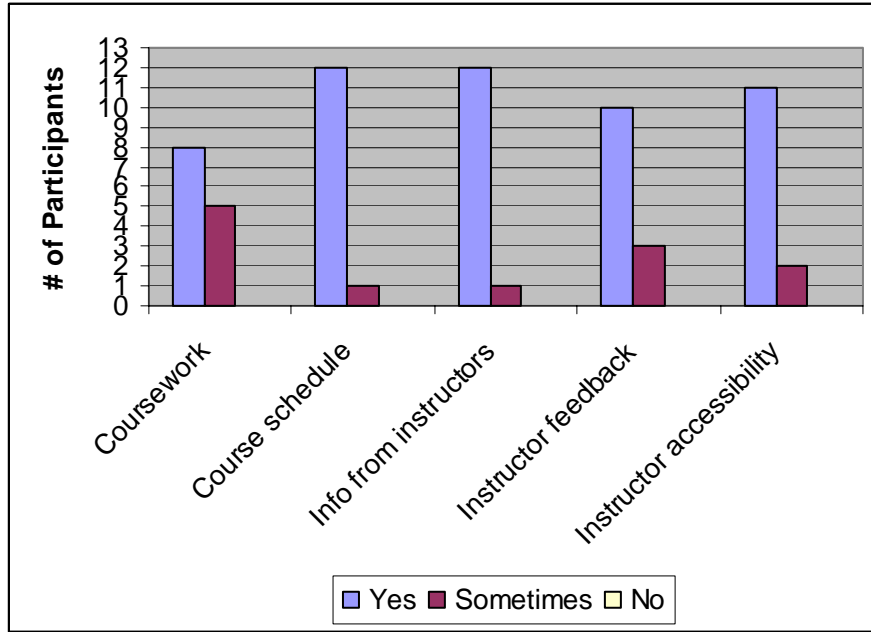


Figure 7. Cohort Two – Communication Formative.

4. Computer-Experience Inventory

Cohort one's (n=25) baseline technology familiarity is presented in Figure 8 while their formative (n=16) and summative (n=11) technology assessment is presented in Figure 9. Cohort two (n=18) and three's (n=15) baseline technology assessment is displayed in Figure 10.

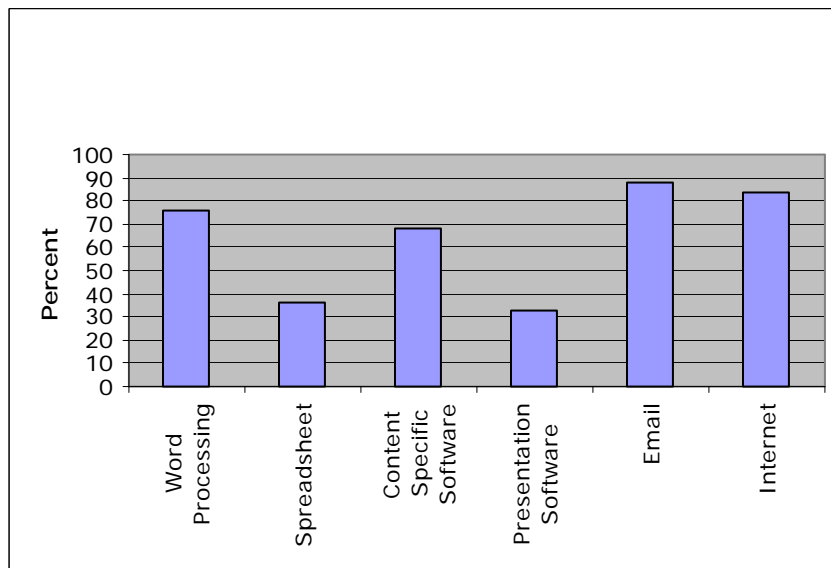


Figure 8. Technology Tools - Cohort One Baseline Familiarity.

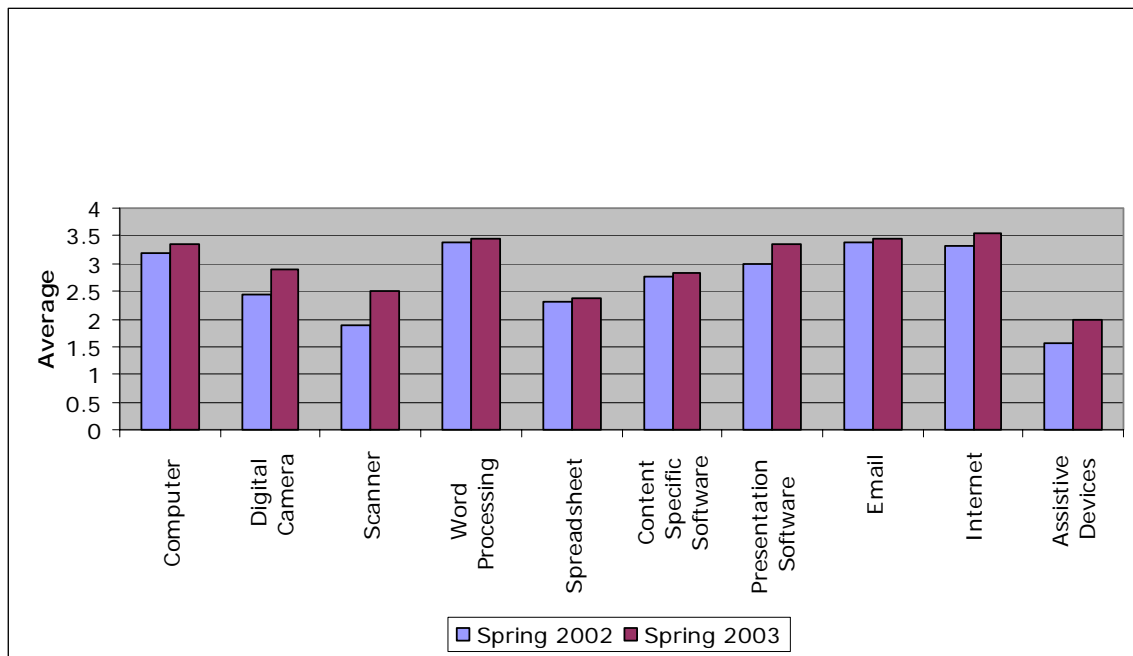


Figure 9. USP - Cohort One - Technology Formative and Summative Assessment.
 (Scale: 1: Not at all; 2: Minimally; 3: Confidently; 4: Can teach others)

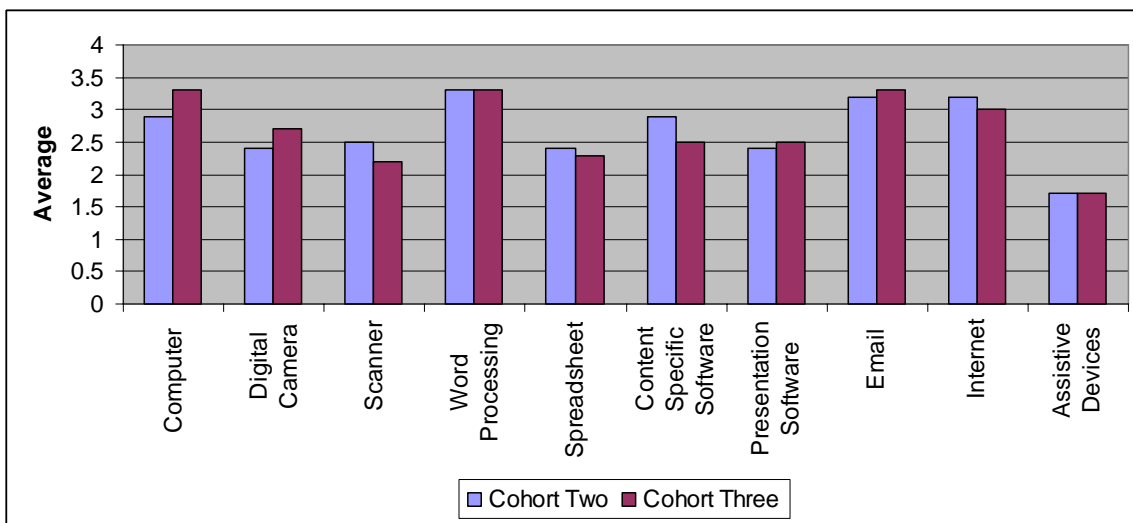


Figure 10. Cohort Two and Three Technology Pre-Assessment.
 (Scale: 1: Not at all; 2: Minimally; 3: Confidently; 4: Can teach others)

5. Field notes. The URBAN IMPACT director and staff provided summaries of all meetings involved in the design and implementation of the program. This includes documentation of interviews for the selection process, orientations, and graduation ceremonies. From the summaries a number of themes have been identified:
- Central Office personnel from the partnering school system stated on several occasions that collaborative effort was one of the first opportunities for them to have an impact on any university coursework that would help align it more closely with the realities of their schools. They were appreciative of the opportunity and were interested in expanded roles.
 - Initially a small cadre of university and school system personnel was involved in the design of the program. Additional faculty and community leaders have been involved in both program development and implementation as they have become aware of its existence and potential to improve teaching and learning in the partnership's urban schools.
 - Initially the program was viewed by school system leaders as beneficial, but not central, to the mission of the school system. Once the superintendent and members of his top staff became directly involved, they began to see its potential and have facilitated its growth more enthusiastically.
 - An interdisciplinary team of university faculty have collaborated on this program in innovative ways. They have collaborated on "strands," taught segments of classes rather than the entire course, shared responsibilities for planning and assessment, and brainstormed creative ways to handle the problems that emerged as the program was implemented. These behaviors were not the norm prior to the introduction of this program.
 - Faculty have expressed frustration, as the Urban Specialists have, with the both organization and communication at various points. Aligning the efforts of more than 15 instructors working with two cohorts has been challenging. Just remembering which cohort needed what coursework, although it is detailed in published syllabi and schedules, has sometimes been an area of confusion. Communication vehicles, including e-mails and the electronic portfolio, have been difficult for some faculty and students to use consistently. Managing the logistics of the program is an area where more concentrated effort is needed. It has been an additional responsibility rather than part of a normal workload.
 - Technology integration has been a challenge at all levels. An initial component of the Professional Learning Plan (PLP) electronic portfolio design was to have each Urban Specialist assigned a school system, Arts & Sciences, and education faculty member as an advisor. Perhaps due to time constraints and limited training, this simply did not occur. The faculty members who learned to use the PLP coordinated feedback through this format. Others continued to use email. One Urban Specialist, in Cohort 1, withdrew from the program due to the "excessive" requirement to use technology which she did not view as essential to her professional role. Most others valued it over time, although they were initially concerned about being asked to use technology that they had not seen before. Once they became comfortable with it, most used it well. In some cases, both students and faculty did not post materials or check feedback in a timely

manner. Growth has occurred for both over the last three years. By the end of the program for Cohorts 1 and 2, however, the Urban Specialists and their faculty are interested in exploring additional technology-based venues (e.g., electronic case studies).

- Focusing the program on talented urban teachers who were already in numerous leadership roles has also posed a challenge to both the Urban Specialists and their faculty members. These teacher leaders have been on school committees, system initiatives, and national professional organizations that have impacted their attendance in the class. Missing a class, when a faculty member is not scheduled to be back for several months, is difficult to overcome. Special adjustments have had to be made for those Urban Specialists who missed classes for legitimate reasons (e.g., videotaping classes, making independent assignments, rescheduling performance assessment presentations).

Lessons Learned

The Urban Specialist Program, now in its third year of implementation, has gathered formative and summative data annually to refine the program on a semester by semester basis. Reflecting on the data and the collective experiences over the last three years, we have identified a number of lessons that have been learned. They fall into the following four categories:

1. *Impact of the program on the Urban Specialists' knowledge, skills, and dispositions.* Nearly all the Urban Specialists have expressed an increased sense of confidence and efficacy in improving their students' performance both academically and socially and in working effectively with families and/or caregivers. They have realized that they can incorporate research-based strategies (e.g., contextual teaching and learning framework, culturally relevant pedagogy, technology) into their teaching and that these strategies do produce increased student engagement and learning. Some have said that they have gained this confidence through their teacher inquiries and action research which gave them skills in documenting the impact of their teaching on student learning. The Urban Specialists, from first grade through high school, have identified specific practices that have made an impact on their students' achievement in their regular classroom achievement. Others have reflected on their standardized test data and identified achievement gains in specific areas that they believe were the result of interventions. As one program graduate has told us, "If one looks at test scores as a measure of student achievement, then my students aren't gaining as much as they should. But if one "digs" deeper and looks at the whole child, they would see that my students are learning. They may not be learning what they are being tested on ..., but they are learning concepts about science and more importantly, about how to be successful. Just yesterday I attended a workshop on Performance Based Learning Activities and shared some projects my students had made. I was so proud to show off what they had accomplished. They had achieved and even exceeded my expectations and the finished product rivaled any product that other teachers from around the county shared from their students. There were many "ooooh's" and "aaaaah's" over my students' work. But, does that impact test scores? Who knows, but I know that my student's found success in the process of doing their projects. And to me, that is what is important. Through the Urban

Specialist program, I learned so much about urban schoolchildren and how to better teach them. My students know that I respect them, and in turn, they respect me and my discipline issues are virtually nonexistent. Before the U.S. program, I was in "survival" mode all the time, just trying to make it until 3:00 everyday. Now, I see the impact that I make on these kids' lives, and when I am out and have a sub, I have many students that stop by during homeroom to make sure that I am back at school. Teachers may be the only consistency these students have, and the U.S. program has helped me to be more consistent and to love my students and my job." Another, reflecting on students' test scores, reported, "As far as showing improvement using our test scores, the only accurate information I can give you is our value added scores. The year before we started the Urban Specialist program, our school had a six-point gain in seventh grade math. The expected gain (national average) is 14 points. (I wasn't at the school that year, but my colleague had a 9-point gain.) The first year of the program, both urban specialists met or exceeded the national average with 14 and 17 point gains. My colleague had the 17. During the second year of the program, both urban specialists exceeded the national average with a 23-point gain."

More importantly, however, most have strengthened their commitment to finding new ways to assure student learning. We have seen, among the participants, a growing understanding of how children's' contexts influence their learning and interactions. The Urban Specialists are now less likely to blame the parents and are more likely to find ways to partner with them and/or find resources to support them. Their comments suggest that they are becoming more proactive in addressing student needs rather than blaming others (e.g., parents, communities, colleagues, administrators). They are also more confident about the notion that teachers can change the way they teach to improve student achievement – and that they must do so if they expect better results. Finally, many have lost patience with administrators who are not as committed as they are to changing the status quo.

2. *Impact on faculty involved in designing and implementing the program.* Faculty, broadly defined as any university, school system, or community leader teaching various components of the program, have developed greater appreciation for each other as a result of their collaborative efforts. This collaboration has reduced, not eliminated, barriers across the stakeholders represented. University faculty have an increased understanding of the need to change or revise some of the more traditional ways of doing course work and interacting with students. They also realized that typical coursework structures can be adapted, although obstacles will undoubtedly be part of the process, to better meet the needs of the constituents being served. School system faculty have become more knowledgeable about the value of research-based practices and the theories undergirding exceptional teaching and learning. Community members have begun to realize that school personnel at both the system and university level, are taking responsibility for assuring that children from diverse cultures and socio-economic levels and those influenced by poverty are being taught in ways that will assure their achievement. One community leader said, "This is the first thing I have seen, coming from the system or the university, that might really make a difference."

3. *Impact on participating schools.* The Urban Specialists have developed a strong support system across their cohorts and with the university faculty. They acknowledge how much they have learned from each other and seek each other's support. They have

also established connections outside their schools (e.g., university, community, human service agencies) to assist themselves, their colleagues, and novice teachers. Many have assumed leadership roles in their schools in organizing teacher induction programs and activities and professional development opportunities for their colleagues. Most importantly, they have assumed advocacy and change agent roles in promoting social justice in their schools and within the school system.

4. *Impact on student learning.* This has been much harder to document. The initial goal was to identify Urban Specialists only in the core content areas and/or at grade levels where students were tested. While this was a model that would have been easier to research, it did not address the needs of the schools. The targeted “high need” schools had exemplary teachers in kindergarten, first grade, special education, and P.E. who were already leaders, who wanted to be in the program, and who had the potential to move teacher induction to a higher level. Likewise, only secondary teachers in three content areas would have state-wide test data for their students. Therefore, a decision was made to include the best teachers in the program and to eliminate gains in student achievement data as a criteria for assessing the impact of the program. We do ask the Urban Specialist graduates to share any documentation they have that shows the impact that their participation has had on student achievement. Some have been able or willing to do this. Others have not.

5. *Impact beyond participating schools.* In designing the coursework and requirements, a concerted effort was made to ensure that products be developed (e.g., one page summaries of research and results of Teacher Inquiries, cases reflecting situations in critical incidents, "tools" illustrating how to incorporate a research-based best practice). The goal was to capture, in some concrete way, the Urban Specialist's learning so that the information and experiences might be shared with and benefit other educators (pre-service and in-service). An additional purpose was to provide some recognition to these educators for their contributions. These resources are posted for others to review and use on the URBAN IMPACT website.

6. *Recognition within the school system and in the state.* Although the efforts and accomplishments of the Urban Specialists have been recognized and celebrated by the collaborative team of program developers, the school system, and the college, we do not see this level of recognition as sufficient. Discussions, initially begun during the first year of implementation for the Urban Specialist Certificate Program, have resumed at both the local and state levels. The partnering school system favors providing compensation for the participants who are making a difference in urban schools. The state, after a series of changes in key leadership positions, is once again looking into the possibility of the incorporation of some yet to be defined "certification" level that could then be accepted by the school system and state. Informally, a number of system and state leaders have acknowledged the significant potential of Urban Specialists as a means to increase the educational experiences of children in urban settings. Our efforts will be focused on developing a more formal means of recognition.

Conclusion

The partner school system, like most systems across the country, loses many of its talented beginning teachers during the first three to five years of teaching. While its percentage of teachers leaving urban schools (approximately 40%) is slightly lower than

the national average (50%), many of our center city schools experience a “revolving door” of teachers who are new to teaching and the community. The Urban Specialist Program has been designed to provide new teachers with peer teacher mentors who can assist them with issues ranging from classroom management to the latest blend of research and practice in instructional strategies—all focused on urban schools. The goal of this program is to reduce the attrition of beginning teachers in urban schools by providing a strong support system for them during their initial years of teaching that is based upon “best practices” that are being identified across the country. We hope to add to the current research base regarding effective teacher induction and retention strategies by sharing what we are learning through our Urban Specialist program.

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Urban Specialists: A New Leadership Role for Talented Urban Teachers

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at

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Abstract

As a result of a Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant, a university, school system, state department of education partnership have collaborated to develop an “Urban Specialist Certificate Program” that recognizes effective urban teachers, promotes their professional growth and leadership, and involves them in system wide leadership roles. This unique program, developed by an interdisciplinary team of university faculty from teacher education and arts and sciences, school system administrators, and community leaders is providing novice urban teachers and teachers in training with mentors at both the school and system level. With their enhanced knowledge of theory and practice, these urban specialists have been able to assume roles as leaders and change agents in promoting social justice.

The full paper is available on the URBAN IMPACT website:

<http://www.outreach.utk.edu/urban>

