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Please cite this paper as:

Grima-Farrell, C. (2012). *Identifying factors that bridge the research to practice gap in Teacher education: An analysis of six research to practice case studies*. Refereed paper presented at 'Going for gold! Reshaping teacher education for the future', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Adelaide, 1–4 July.

Published by: Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

Available via stable URL: https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012_grima-farrell.pdf

Review status: Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

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Identifying factors that bridge the research to practice gap in Teacher education: An analysis of six research to practice case studies

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Advances in research on evidence-based practices for educating teachers to cater for students with disabilities have generated a strong knowledge base that can underpin efforts to assist teachers in making classrooms more inclusive. Despite these advances, there remains a significant gap between our accumulated knowledge about effective educational practices and the extent to which they are utilized. This inability to bridge the research to practice gap, has had an adverse effect on the ability of individual teachers to respond to the needs of all students. This project builds on prior knowledge and promotes an increased understanding of the factors that both enable and interfere with teacher's ability and skills, acquired through a graduate Masters course, to support the translation of research to practice (RTP) in inclusive education.

This investigation examines six case studies of the application of various research-based practices in diverse educational settings. It employs an ex post facto analysis of the experience of six graduate educators who developed and implemented an applied intervention as part of a graduate Masters course. The experience involved identifying and implementing an approach that had the potential to directly address student and teacher needs. The cases provide accounts of a range of teacher educators who were from both primary and secondary school settings.

The implications of this study are three fold. It firstly explores and applies the existing literature on teacher education and RTP as a framework to investigate the diverse cases. Secondly it identifies and explains factors in teacher education that contributed to the status of research-based projects in practical applications. Thirdly this research expands upon teacher education knowledge through building upon these assertions to enhance the use of effective teacher education practices that address the needs identified by school based practitioners as they strive to address the diverse needs of our students.

Key words: teacher education, case study, research to practice and inclusion

Introduction

This study examined participant accounts of a graduate teacher preparation experience and its effectiveness in promoting the skills and knowledge required to implement, sustain or scale research based projects over time. In doing so this study sought to identify the factors that contributed to successful teacher education experiences that impacted upon the implementation and sustainment of the projects over time. It employed prior knowledge of factors that contributed to the successful translation of research-to-practice and teacher education (identified in the literature) and sought to build a greater understanding of how this literature based knowledge manifested in practical applications.

This research was prompted by the expectation that educators are required to be responsive to inclusion as a movement through the use of research-based practice to address the needs of their students (Ashman & Elkins, 2011; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), 2000; Disability Standards, 2005; Foreman, 2005; Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris & Watson, 1998; Hobbs & Westling, 1998; Innes, 2007; Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011; Singal, 2008; Slee, 2005; Villa & Thousand, 2000). It responded to the call for more effective practice based knowledge on the translation of research-to-practice (RTP) by investigating projects that were the capstone experience of a graduate level teacher education program. A number of factors have been presented as contributors to the gap between research and practice in teacher education (TE) (Grima-Farrell, Bain & McDonagh, 2011). They include research not being designed to make a practical difference and inadequate linkages between teacher preparation programs and the workplace (Bain, 2004; Billups, 1997; Carnine, 1997; Foegan, Espin, Allinder, & Markell, 2001; Goodlad, 1990; Grima-Farrell, et al., 2011; Malouf & Schiller, 1995; Sydoriak & Fields, 1997).

The questions that guided this review were focussed on identifying the factors, in a shared teacher education experience, that influenced research to practice efforts, which had the capacity to make educational settings more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all students. Inclusion is described and defined, as an approach focused on responding to the diversity of student needs in ways that are beneficial to students with (O'Neil, 1994; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 1998) and without disabilities (Foreman, 2005; Rogers, 1993; Sailor, 1991). As such, inclusive education represents a whole school concern and works to align special education with general education in a manner that most effectively and efficiently imparts quality education to all students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997).

This comparative case study examined six discrete accounts of the school-based experiences of educators who shared the same graduate Masters' course. It used the RTP and TE literature to frame the data collection tools to investigate the impact of a teacher education course on assisting educators to promote the use of valuable research to enhance the gains made by students. The specific question that guided this review was: How did a teacher education experience (Masters in Education, inclusive education) contribute to enhancing the skills and knowledge required to implement and sustain research based projects that responded to diverse student needs?

Method

A multiple or collective case study approach was used to investigate the teacher education experiences of six experienced teachers in school settings that ranged from Kindergarten to year 10. All participants were female and their ages ranged from 40-54 at the commencement of the Masters course. All were experienced teachers and had taught at an average of 4 schools. All six had completed two university degrees prior to participating in this research. Five of the six projects were conducted in primary or elementary schools with student enrolments ranging from 350 to 600. Each educational site was the subject of an individual case and the use of the multiple case study method, allowed for the in-depth investigation of multiple cases within a range of applied educational settings. This multiple case study design catered for the investigation of the TE and RTP phenomenon through extensive description and content analysis. The evidence from multiple cases is considered more solid and compelling than the investigation of single case (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 2003), enhancing the articulation of why the experiences occurred as they did. An ex post facto causal-comparative research design was employed to study the cases and the methodology included the triangulation of cases with the extant literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This research built on prior TE knowledge (identified in the literature) by expanding on the comprehension of the TE factors that both enabled and interfered with the successful translation of research-into-practice in inclusive education. A literature search conducted by Grima-Farrell, Bain & McDonagh (2011) presented TE and RTP studies from 1967 to 2011. In the literature, TE represented an avenue that links the efforts of researchers and educators who work in inclusive education environments to enhance RTP endeavors (Everington & Hamill, 1996; Golder, Norwich, & Bayliss, 2005; Grima-Farrell et al, 2011; Villa & Thousand, 1996). Teacher education in an inclusive education context is identified in both research and position papers as a key strategy in bridging the RTP gap, furthering the capacity to collaboratively link university and school efforts (Capizzi & Fuchs, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L. S., 1998; Golder et al., 2005; Gravani, 2008; Korthagen, 2004; Winn & Zundans, 2004). TE can assist in reducing the RTP gap as it represents an avenue linking the efforts of researchers and educators who work in inclusive environments to enhance RTP endeavors (Everington & Hamill, 1996; Golder, et al., 2005; Villa & Thousand, 1996).

The need for university and school educators to engage collaboratively in research in an effort to improve practice was promoted (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Collaboration referred to researchers working with practitioners to address their questions and needs. According to Darling-Hammond (1994), Gravani (2008) and Winn & Zundans (2004), involving teachers in the research process encouraged deeper comprehension and ownership of research efforts. This TE and RTP literature was analysed and used to develop interview and focus questions for three data collection occasions (Grima-Farrell et al, 2011).

The data collection sequence included one to one open ended and semi structured interviews and a focus group. Collectively these data gathering opportunities combined to gain details pertaining to the teacher education knowledge and experience gained from six participants as they implemented their individual RTP projects in their school settings. This data collection sequence drew responses from participants' about the TE factors that they identified as having a positive or negative impact on their ability to translate theory (university gained knowledge) -into-practice (school based experiences). Participants specifically reflected on the Part of the shared TE experience that involved the designing and implementing of an applied education intervention in schools. The six participants who completed the graduate level subject were required to conduct an independent research project. The research-

based project was to specifically address the needs of their individual settings. The content of the individual cases included literacy, assessment, peer tutoring and spelling. This task was the culmination of a two and a half year university based Master of Education (Inclusive Education) course.

The Master of Education (Inclusive Education) course was developed by the University to graduate highly skilled teachers capable of acting as agents of change in a range of inclusive educational settings. It aimed at enhancing core knowledge and skills required to teach, consult, collaborate, advocate, and evaluate in an inclusive service delivery model. Specific themes across the course included: research, advocacy, and the evaluative knowledge and skills required to scale-up innovations in inclusive education to the level of the school. The course addressed both Australian and International theory, research and best practice in the field of inclusive education. The course comprised seven core subjects of a prescribed sequence. The course structure and subjects were carefully designed, scaffolded, and ordered to enable participants to build capacity with theory, research and application in practice.

Results

The responses generated from participants during the interviews and the focus group were compared to the TE and RTP literature. This comparison built on the comprehension of the practice-based knowledge and skills required to reduce the RTP gap. It also went further to add to the practical elements that were identified by participants as being beneficial to TE experiences. It yielded a cross section of relevant guiding information on ways TE can contribute to bridging the RTP gap.

During the open ended interviews participants responses presented broad claims that were consistent with the literature about ways in which TE enhances the required knowledge to implement and sustain research in practice. Responses during the semi-structured interviews expanded on these initial comments. They became more detailed and examples that increased the comprehension of the practicality of claims were presented. During the focus group (final data collection opportunity and the first whole research participant cohort experience), participants compared their reflections on the course and their school based experiences. Consistent themes were identified and strengthened as participants compared how their teacher education experience (specifically Masters in Education, inclusive education) contributed to enhancing the skills and knowledge required to implement and sustain their individual research based projects.

Analysis of the results identified that all six participants suggested that for TE to be effective it should directly respond to teacher need through an approach that is clear and consistent. All participants shared thoughts on the usefulness of the Master's Course and its contribution to sustaining the projects. Participants described the *usefulness* of the course in a number of ways. Comments about the depth of understanding about what constitutes research-based projects were shared. All participants suggested that the consistency in the structure and design of the course had assisted in their ability to comprehend new knowledge and to be able to share this knowledge with other staff members at their school settings. Participants reported that presentations to school staff were modelled on the information gained and the structure demonstrated through the course. The resonating consistent notion shared by participants was that the course was effective as the aims of the university were the same as the school aims. This was described as making the transfer between research and practice more practical and effective as the skills and knowledge learnt through the course were relevant to the needs of their schools. The shared goals and the transference of skills and knowledge were strengthened as other staff members wanted to be involved due to the practicality and accessibility of the course content and its delivery.

The following section presents the consistencies between factors identified in the TE and RTP literature. It goes further to present examples of the way participants articulated the impact of the Master's course on their individual cases. Responses are presented using the three themes that were prioritised by participants as being critical to TE initiatives; depth of knowledge, structure of the course and collaboration and sufficient preparation.

Depth of knowledge

The Master's course presented an example of how teacher education had the capacity to promote the use of research-based practices when subjects or courses in a preparation program are intentionally linked, reinforcing key ideas and enabling students to build both a big and small picture understanding such practices. When such courses directly respond to teacher needs through a clear and consistent approach the bridge between research and practice can be further reduced efforts (Capizzi & Fuchs, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L. S., 1998; Golder, et al., 2005; Gravani, 2008; Grima-Farrell et al., 2011; Korthagen, 2004; Winn & Zundans, 2004).

Meg and Mary's report on the Masters course were consistent with the comments of all research participants. Meg stated that the Masters course provided a depth of knowledge gained which she tried to share at her implementation setting:

"We really had to go into depth with it. I had to know Peer Assisted Learning inside out. I knew where it worked, how many studies had been done, why it worked, so I had all that research to back up what I was saying to teachers. I presented all that to them, I suppose because I had done it in depth, nothing was on the surface it was so thorough.

I know I was trying to give them (staff members) the knowledge that I had gained from my course. For example that when I did my power point presentation, we had done a power point presentation in a previous assignment on Collaboration so I presented my Peer Assisted Learning power point, it was like I was doing an assignment in an assignment I tried to be as thorough as I could, so all the previous work that I learned I tried to put it into the project" (Meg).

Mary described how the Masters course had a strong impact on her research-based project. She identified that topics, such as assessment were covered in depth and how she was able to share research knowledge gained from the course with her staff:

"We were presented with a lot of the research across different subjects. That was brought back to my staff when we were doing this project and devising it. You know, learning about collaboration, working as a team, what was going to be good for the whole school and a lot of the stuff I had learned through my university course, I was able to use when we were devising that program and implementing it in the school" (Mary).

Structure of the course

Participants compared the structure of their teacher education experience to the design of their research-based projects. These comparisons identified the importance of a complete implementation strategy. Research based projects and teacher education experiences that are complete by being comprehensive, accessible and practical were said to be more successful. When these features were woven into the course and the individual research project designs, the engagement of all parts of the project had a reinforcing effect that had the capacity to further enhance its success (Darling-Hammond, 2006b; DETYA, 2000; Francis, 2002; Grima-Farrell et al., 2011; Gunstone & Northfield, 1993; Sydoriak & Fields, 1997).

Sam commented on the structure of the course and described how the Masters course assisted her in being able to cater for the needs of the staff and students at her implementation setting:

“I really think that the way our course was structured was to build up our capacity. I guess I modelled my instruction about my project on the way the course was structured. We had done all those things on collaboration, in-service stuff, we had to do the power points and the pre and post tests. I guess I tried to model what I did (with the project) on what we had done on the course as the aim was the same. Anything that we had done in that course was building towards the research based project. Anything that we had to do, that was important, we had to try and put that in” (Sam).

Comments about the Masters course also identified that it had a strong impact on the implementation of my research-based project. Consistency, collaboration and feedback that were positive features of the course were transferred to the implementation and planning of my research project:

“I think the consistency in the Masters course across all subjects, was replicated in our setting because everybody knew what they were going to expect. I think the collaborative approach through the Uni masters project, the feedback; the consistency was replicated in my setting” (Chris).

The consistency in comments on the Master’s course confirmed the positive impact it had on the implementation and sustainment of individual projects. Sam summarized the strong impact of the Masters course well as she compared course and school aims. Sam stated *“like the course, the school must support teachers by addressing their needs and capacity. The course aims are the same as our school aims” (Sam).*

Collaboration and sufficient preparation

Research-based projects can be enhanced when teachers and researchers work together to develop links between theory (researchers perspective) and practice (classroom teachers perspective). This can contribute to teachers feeling sufficiently prepared which creates an avenue for research-based practices to be effectively used in classroom (Everington & Hamill, 1996; Foorman & Moats, 2004; Golder, et al., 2005; Grima-Farrell et al., 2011; Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003; Villa & Thousand, 1996).

Diane introduced the sense of inclusion as the major take away from the Masters course. She referred to her interpretation of course components that were meaningful. Diane commented on the adaptation of features of the course to suit the needs of her secondary setting. She also referred to her moving from one secondary setting to another and identified the positive impact collaboration had on the status of her project:

“The whole sense of inclusion was the driving force of the whole masters. I was trying to get these kids included in every aspect of their education. There were things in there that I reflected on especially because I was going between the two schools, trying to make my thing happen elsewhere. In my job in the secondary setting, it is all about collaboration, if I didn’t collaborate with everyone it still wouldn’t be running as it is now in my new school” (Diane).

Wilma’s expanded on these school and course links when she described how her staff had identified the strong research knowledge base she had acquired through the course. She also made reference to the parent support raised as a result of having their children involved in the research-based project and how the experience contributed to promoting the link between home and school:

“I think one fact of it (the course) was that I had a pretty strong knowledge base in the topic I was doing because I had done a lot of the background work in the course and people recognised that. It wasn’t just that I was trying to introduce this tool that I thought was really good. They understood that

it was research-based, I had studied it, I had implemented it and it was a positive move. I think that was the most important thing. I also think that for parents it (the research-based project) was particularly positive. I got letters back from parents saying what a great thing it was and that they were very proud for their children to be part of a research project and they actually asked for ways that they could work on their children's reading fluency at home, so that was a way for us bridging the school from home gap" (Wilma).

In brief the depth of knowledge gained through the Masters course was identified as being critical to enhancing the skills and knowledge required to implement and sustain research based projects that responded to diverse student needs. The TE experience was prioritised as key to RTP endeavours as these skills, knowledge and attitudes were essential to effective collaboration between school and university efforts. There was also consistency across all research participants in their responses about the effectiveness of the course structure as it presented essential theoretical knowledge through consistent practical components. These practical components included advanced organisers, which presented expectations graphically at the start of every unit and the consistency in delivery and structure across subjects. The assessment tasks were effective in building the Masters students' capacity, as they were relevant to school settings. All participants stated that the course was demanding and equally beneficial in increasing the depth of research-based knowledge and the ability to be instrumental in implementing it. The merging of theoretical and practical components was described as being highly effective in delivering new knowledge and preparing students in their ability to transfer the newly gained skills and knowledge with other school based educators.

Conclusion

The consistencies in the teacher education research-to-practice literature and data collected as a result of participant experiences indicated that research alone could only provide a road map to practice. Suggestions that attention should be given to organizational issues so that research-based practices can be sustained over time warrant additional investigation (Miller, George, & Fogt, 2005). For the TE to have an impact on reducing the RTP gap, a need exists to incorporate empirically derived educational practices into the instructional repertoire of educators (Foegan et.al., 2001; Grima-Farrell, et.al., 2011; Hattie, 2009; Smith, Schmidt, Edelen-Smith, & Cook, in press), as teacher knowledge and context are important to conceptualizing the relationship between research and practice (Malouf & Schiller, 1995).

Differences in comments about the type of support gained from the teacher education experience were identified. These differences pertained to the benefits of practical tools such as the Gannt chart (a bar graph illustration of the schedule of the project which identifies a breakdown in structure) to Sam's explanation of the advantages in ensuring consistency in comprehension of a common educational language and the way that language was used to communicate knowledge across all stakeholders. Sam also identified the benefits of having a colleague whom she completed the course with at her setting.

Individual accounts of the shared TE experience identified consistencies in the need for depth of knowledge, effective course structure, collaboration and sufficient preparation. This supported literature based knowledge and went beyond these TE and RTP factors to explain their influence and presence in school based contexts.

The experiences gained through the Master's course were reported to have changed the educational expectations of each participant. This was reflected in their individual settings as all six participants expressed that they initially successfully implemented a research-based project in their settings. Four of the projects went on to be scaled and two projects became extinct. Regardless of the status of the projects each participant reported that their TE experience was highly effective in building their

capacity to deliver and implement new content within their school settings and beyond. They provided additional and guiding practice based information and examples on how the same TE experience assisted them to respond to the unique variables within their school settings.

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