

The Urban Teacher Programme at Wheelock College in Boston Massachusetts: Models of Recruitment, Retention and Teacher Preparation

Report and Reflective Summary of Research

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1. Background and Research Objectives

This report has been made possible through a jointly funded travel scholarship of 2003 by the following: Universities Council for the Education of Teachers and American Associations of Colleges for Teacher Education (UCET/ACCTE) and the Stanley Hewett Memorial Trust. The purpose of this report is to examine the Urban Teacher Programme at Wheelock College, in Boston, Massachusetts. The Programme has been recognised as a model of good practice, in terms of its recruitment procedures, student retention and preparing teachers to teach in culturally diverse urban settings.

1.1 Context

The new Standards and Requirements for teacher education in England have drawn attention to the need for teachers to be fully equipped to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Both the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) are keen to promote diversity and recognise the need for this to be reflected in the teaching profession. The TTA has recently funded providers of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) to recruit and retain students from minority backgrounds onto their course. Similarly, in North America, the Federal Government has provided funding to three States so that they can create initiatives that will increase the number of minority groups on teacher training programmes. In response to the Federal Government's proposal, the City of Boston has become one of the few cities committed to implementing this scheme through the Urban Teacher Programme at Wheelock College.

Wheelock College is private and in 1996 was considered as having one of the leading teacher education programmes in the United States by the National Centre for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST). The College, a prestigious teacher training institution in Boston, has been able to successfully recruit and retain significant numbers of minority students onto their Urban Teacher Programme. The Course, which started in the summer of 1990, is aimed at preparing teachers mainly from diverse backgrounds to work in multicultural and multilingual settings.

1.2 Research Objectives:

To investigate the Urban Teacher Programme at Wheelock College,
To examine the models of recruitment procedures and retention patterns of minority students of the Programme.
To identify how the Programme prepares students for culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Key Elements

Primary research involving three qualitative exercises:

Tape-recorded semi structured interviews with tutors, the head of the Programme, and teachers from partnership schools.

Observations of lectures.

Fieldnotes based on general impressions of the College etc.

Visits to two partnership schools.

Inspection of documented data and other relevant materials.

2.2 Primary Research

The tape-recorded interviews were conducted with 6 respondents and comprised the following:

Three lecturers on the Urban Teacher Programme, lasting approximately 20 minutes.

The Course or Programme leader, lasting approximately 40 minutes.

The Vice President for Community Affairs at the College lasting approximately 40 minutes.

A Principal from one of the partnership schools and mentor teacher lasting approximately 30 minutes.

A teacher from one of the partnership schools lasting approximately 20 minutes.

2.2.2 Discussions with Vice President for Community Affairs

Several discussions with the Vice President for Community Affairs for the College, were also conducted throughout the investigation.

3. Observations of teaching sessions

Observations were made of two teaching sessions at the College; these comprised the Learning and Development in Children Course and Developing Numeracy for Diverse Learners Course.

2.2.4. Observations of partnership schools

The researcher had the opportunity to visit to partnership schools, one in Boston and the other in Cambridge.

2.3 Inspection of relevant documents:

The general structure and outline of the Urban Teacher Programme and the general prospectus of courses.

The summer 2003 schedule of the Programme.

The content of syllabi including, Learning and Development in Children, Developing Numeracy for Diverse Learners, Language and Culture and Developing Literacy for Diverse Learners: Early Childhood and Elementary

The admissions requirements contained in the general framework of the Programme and course prospectus.

The Fieldwork

The fieldwork for the interviews with tutors, observations of teaching sessions and schools, and collection of data, was carried out over an approximate 2 week period, May 1 to June 13, 2003 at Wheelock College in Boston and the surrounding area. A schedule for observations of sessions, school visits and discussion with relevant tutors was devised by the Head of the Programme. A few comments by the Head of the Programme, Dr M-F and the Vice Principal for Community Affairs, Dr TP have been recorded in this report verbatim. Initials have been used to maintain the identities of the respondents.

3. Findings (1) Organisation of the Programme

3.1 Programme Overview

The Urban Teacher Programme is a master's level course that is designed to prepare a diverse student population of elementary or primary school teachers who wish to work with children in grades 1 – 6 in the public or private urban setting. The programme includes course work in the history, philosophy and current political context of contemporary schooling; courses in areas such as child development; methods of teaching reading, writing, maths and science; and 75 hours of pre-practicum observations followed by 300 hundred hours of teaching placements. Every course that each student takes must meet for 36 hours, which are the same number of hours and requirements of a full semester course. Students have to complete the various elements of the course to develop sufficient credits.

3.2 Philosophy and Context of Programme

Underpinning the philosophy of the Urban Teacher Programme, like all the programmes at the College is the view that students should be engaged in reflective and critical thinking. Also, as the Vice President for Community Affairs, Dr TP, stated the Programme is in line with the College's notion of preparing all students for teaching:

Which is child-centred, family focus and community based. It is not simply that teaching and learning is child-centred, it has to be family-focused and it has to be embedded in a deep partnership with the community and all of our students whether in the Urban Teacher Programme or other Wheelock ones take a Life Span Development Course, because we say that we are teaching our teachers to teach in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

With specific reference to the Urban Teacher Programme, Dr TP said that its underpinning philosophy was reflected in the recruitment of students and faculty members teaching on the Course:

I think the interesting thing is that in the early conceptualisation of S's programme... it was clear that in order to train teachers to work effectively with all the nation's children, that you could not train teachers to work in a diverse setting in a monocultural setting so context is part of text and so ur creating the explicit notion that the group had to be at least 50% students of colour because the notion is if it's 10% it doesn't matter, if it's 20% we've got to really shift the power dynamics and the paradigm so that people of colour are not marginal, that this is what the new society is about and this creates a context where the issues are discussed in a different way.

Part of the remit of the Programme is that it also had to recruit 60% faculty members who are people of colour to teach on the course. Dr TP gave a very interesting rationale for this and stated:

If you have a significant people of colour and the White people in the group then learn in a different way..Because I think you know all the new studies suggest that what really changes White students in higher ed. is not simply the curriculum it's when people of colour are significantly part of the environment and so how can you purport to prepare students to work with people of colour when you have them in an all white setting so that's was conceptually why it [the Programme] was conceived.

According to Dr TP academic staff on the Programme, are specifically recruited who are exemplary in dealing with issues of race, class and gender. Also, the hiring of Black faculty members throughout the College was not done by way of advertisement but via personal contacts. For example, several Black academic staff at the College were headhunted when they were in the final year of their doctoral programme at Harvard and other local universities.

All the course outlines of the Urban Teacher Programme contained strong elements of diversity and multiculturalism, in their descriptions, learning objectives and reading lists. Certainly from a theoretical perspective, students seemed sufficiently well equipped for working in culturally and linguistically diverse urban settings.

3.3 Programme Structure

The course is over a one-year period in total and comprises three components. Parts one and two take place in the summer semester 1 and part three in the Fall (Autumn), Spring and Summer semester 2. Part one of the programme is very intensive and starts at the end of May and continues to the second week of August. In June, the courses are held in the evening and on weekends and students must take all of the prescribed courses.

After the initial coursework in June, students attend integrated history and social science curricular seminars in the evening in July and the second half of August. Significantly, they undertake student teaching placements for seven weeks, in selected partnership or professional development schools in Boston. Partnership or professional schools include a range of public schools and also those that have substantial bilingual programmes or young achievers schools. Students are supervised by a mentor teacher, and work under a co-operating teacher. Mentor teachers are fully qualified, have taught in school(s) for at least five years and very often teach at Wheelock and are assigned to a particular school district, as part of their teaching load. A mentor teacher observes a student at least five times during that period, and after each of the observed visit meets the main class teacher, referred, to as the co-operating teacher. The programme is modelled after medical training and reference is made, for example, to seminars as clinical and student placement in school as internship.

The students have two main choices of teaching placement after completing the summer course. Students can teach in professional development school, and spend an entire year as an intern and get paid. Alternatively, they can be hired at a non partnership school and receive a regular salary and be under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Other choices available to students include working for a year in inclusive schools, that is, schools where there are special needs children. In those schools students do their clinical seminar on site and take courses at Wheelock College in the evening. Other students may spend a year at the only private parochial partnership school and again do seminars in the school and take courses at Wheelock; whilst others opt for a young achievers school.

There are two stages for students to obtain teacher's status. The first stage is known as initial certification and the second, professional certification, which is the full teacher's qualification. Upon completion of the course in the summer, and the Massachusetts Licensed Test, students are eligible for the Initial Elementary Teacher's License to teach in the State of Massachusetts and 28 other states. Clearly, not all students are at this point. However, some have already been hired in particular schools for September as class teachers, known as head teachers, on the basis that they will meet all of these requirements. According to the head of the Programme, students have to complete a tremendous amount of work to actually gain employment for September. They have to pass five courses, the rigorous requirements of student teaching and two further exams, Literacy and Communication and Elementary Subject Knowledge. However, whatever stage students' reach, they have to take courses during the Fall (Autumn) and Spring semesters in the evening in order to obtain their masters degree. Student teachers irrespective of whether they have received their initial state license or not, work alongside a teacher mentor.

Regarding the second stage of fully qualified teacher status, the regulations are presently undergoing review and will particularly affect student teachers gaining the professional certification. Under the current regulations students could apply for professional certification, by completing their masters, teaching 400 hours, the equivalent of a semester, and completing additional coursework. In the new regulations, students must complete an 18 credit plus programme after gaining their masters to apply for the professional certificate. Therefore, after obtaining their masters, they must do another 18 credits of advanced level courses, in other words six advanced courses that are three credits each, including a support course. Half of these advanced courses must be in the arts and science fields. The other courses can be in areas as diverse as technology, or special education. Students can also do courses that are general, specialist or in leadership providing they adhere to the requirements that nine of their courses be in arts and science.

4. Findings (2) Recruitment, Admissions and Retention

4.1 Patterns of Recruitment

Generally, 80% of the students on the programme are minority students or students of colour consisting of typically 15-25 students. The students on the summer Programme of 2003 were mainly African Americans. Of the 15 students 2 were White and the other Asian. In this report the term Asian is used as it is in the United States, referring to any person who originates in continental Asia.

The Head of the Programme, Dr M-F stated that a proactive approach is adopted to recruit students of colour onto the Course. Dr M-F reported that the Course has such a reputation that recruitment is often done by word of mouth from other students who are graduates of the Programme. Information is also sent to Boston Public Schools and schools in the surrounding areas.

According to both, Drs M-F and TP, colleagues actively recruit students by visiting various organisations. Dr M-F makes contact with Principals or Heads of schools and enquires about teaching assistants who are from minority groups that may be interested in the Programme. There is a verbal agreement between Dr M-F and many principals concerning the recruitment of teaching assistants onto the Programme so that they can obtain the necessary requirements for their master's degree and ultimately teacher's certificate.

4.2 Admissions

Dr M-F also oversees the admissions of students onto the Programme. The admission requirements for the Course are fairly stringent and students who are admitted on the Programme undergo a rigorous process. Students must have a bachelor's degree and have a strong academic background. They also have to "demonstrate personal and professional potential, as well as a firm commitment to urban education." They have to submit the standard College application, a resume or curriculum vitae, an essay, three references and transcripts from previous undergraduate and graduate studies. Students also go through a series of psychological tests consisting of vignettes on various classroom scenarios including writing to parents and aspects of the curriculum. These tests are then followed by a personal interview with Dr M-F. The students are tested on their creativity, personality, aptitude for teaching and commitment to working with children in various communities. The whole process lasts for up to two hours.

In terms of the cost of student tuition for the Course, the researcher was informed that tuition fees are expensive because Wheelock is a private institution. However, many students do receive financial assistance often in the form of a student loan, which has a low interest rate; as long as they are attending the Course, they do not have to repay the loan immediately. Again, students have to go through an application process and must meet certain criteria in order to qualify for financial aid. There are also other students who receive grants and scholarships.

4.3 Retention Rate

The retention rate of students on the Programme is extremely impressive. Ever since the inception of the Programme in 1990, over 90% of students have successfully completed the Course.

In the words of Dr M-F:

We actually beat the national norms, so retention in terms of people completing the programme has been very high, well over 90% but also we have beaten the national norms in people staying in urban teaching. 90% of our teachers who have completed this programme, who have graduated from this programme are still teaching in urban settings. The national norm is that they will teach in an urban setting for a year and then leave and this has not been the case for this group of students.

When Dr M-F was further pressed to give reasons for such a high retention rate, she stated that:

The drop out is very, very small and I think one of things is that we really try to do..., we do a couple things, we let the students know that we really care about them and that we don't admit students in this programme to fail but we also let them know that it's very rigorous, it's a lot of work, but we also try to be very very supportive.

Clearly, the high level of commitment of students and the degree of support that they receive from academic staff consistently reflects the outstanding retention rate. Also, the rigorous admission process where students are carefully screened is a contributory factor for the retention of students on the programme.

5. Findings (3) Observations of Sessions and Partnership Schools

5.1 Observations of Seminar Sessions

The researcher had the opportunity of observing two classes taught by lecturers at the College: the Learning and Development Class conducted by the Course leader herself, Dr M-F, and the Numeracy for Diverse Learners taught by Mrs JL. The content and the teaching of both Classes were of a high standard. I was able to observe the second session of the Learning and Development Class. Clearly, Dr M-F was an experienced practitioner and demonstrated her extensive knowledge of the subject area, which primarily focused on child development and major theories of development. At the beginning of the session she tested the students' knowledge of their previous learning and she adopted an interactive approach in her teaching methods. Students were divided into various groups to work collaboratively on various given scenarios. In the Numeracy for Diverse Learning session, the tutor, Mrs JL also engaged the students by asking them about their own experiences of learning Maths. Since, this was the first session of the programme a significant amount of time was devoted to the course outline, drawing attention to the essential reading texts required for assignments and in-class group readings and activities. The teaching approach was student centred.

5.2 Observations of Partnership Schools

After completing the initial course in June, as previously mentioned, pupils were placed in a partnership or professional development school. I had the opportunity of visiting two schools: one which was a public school which had a bilingual programme located in inner city Boston and the other, a Quaker school in Cambridge, home to Harvard University. In the Boston school, some 70% of the students were of Chinese origin, 15% were Black and 15% White. The teaching, policy and practice in relation to diversity seemed excellent. Pupils responded positively to the classroom environment. Conversely, at the Quaker school in Cambridge 80% of pupils were White, 10% Black and 10% Asian. Apparently, the Quaker school was the only private parochial one chosen as a partnership school because of its explicit anti-racist practices. It was one of the best schools that this researcher has ever had the opportunity to visit. The particularly striking aspect of the school was the relationship between teachers and pupils. In many ways the School had an extremely liberal and creative approach to teaching and learning but pupils were very respectful, both to each other and members of staff. Class sizes were small, on average 15 per class, which could have accounted in part for the behaviour of pupils. However, it seemed that each pupil was highly valued. Significantly, the ethos of the school was in line with the Quaker philosophy of equality, diversity and inclusivity.

6. Conclusion: Overall Appraisal of the Programme

In general this report finds the Urban Teacher Programme to be an excellent Course in preparing teachers to work in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. The contents of its curricular reflected in course outlines underpin concepts of multiculturalism, diversity and inclusivity. The Programme as both Dr M-F and Dr TP explain is intensive and students obviously have a high level of commitment.

The Course has been able to successfully recruit Black and minority students. More crucially it has been able to retain over 90% of students on the Programme which is way above the national norms for student retention. The rigorous admissions process and support of academic staff that students receive once they are on the course are important contributory factors for the high student retention rate. Such is the quality of the course that students who complete the course and become fully certified teachers continue to work in urban settings well after obtaining their qualifications.

7. Recommendations

1. initiatives along the lines of the Urban Teacher Programme at Wheelock College in Boston could be developed in targeted higher education institutions in Britain. Additionally, targeted outreach for minority students needs to be implemented.
2. More lecturers from Black and Asian backgrounds need to be recruited into higher education, particularly onto teacher training courses.
3. Providers of teacher training could adopt more strategic and creative approaches to recruiting teachers from minority groups. These approaches are being adopted at the researcher's institution, the University of Central England in Birmingham since the Teacher Training Agency TTA has provided money for teacher training institutions to actively recruit Black and minority students.
4. Black and minority students need to be supported when they are on teacher training courses.
5. Whilst the new Standards for teacher training gives some attention to issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, teacher training institutions need to ensure that multiculturalism and inclusivity are embedded in the content of their courses and not solely as an additional extra.
6. Greater attention needs to be given to incorporating notions of anti-racism and diversity in the National Curriculum.
7. National and international consultants are a necessary prerequisite to establish similar programmes within the British context.

8. Personal Reflections and Outcomes of the Visit

Personal Contributions and Research

The UCET/ACCTE travel scholarship of 2003 gave me the opportunity to spend a period of two weeks travelling to Wheelock College in Boston Massachusetts. It enabled me to investigate the models of recruitment, retention and teacher preparation of the Urban Teacher Programme. Also, it gave me an opportunity to explore how faculty members on the Programme approach issues of diversity. As a leading provider of teacher education in the United States, the College has indeed implemented a proactive approach to recruiting students from diverse cultural backgrounds to enter the teaching profession. Additionally, the visit allowed me time and space to reflect on my own practices and ways in which, I, can explore different approaches to training teachers in inclusive contexts. I was also able to forge good professional relationships.

Gains made by Wheelock College

I believe that Wheelock College has benefited from my visit. I gave a seminar presentation to students on the Urban Teacher Programme. Faculty members, who were teaching on the Urban Teacher Programme and other courses, including the Dean of Education and administrators for the Course, also attended the presentation. I provided a comparative analysis of the achievement levels of different ethnic groups within the British context and highlighted class and gender issues. Interestingly, the audience was particularly keen to hear about my perspective on race and class, and how class in particular is played out in British society. The seminar was well received and in general the Institution stated that they greatly benefited from my visit.

Lasting Relationships between the UCET Grant holder and Wheelock College

I expect there to be a lasting relationship between myself and the College, as the Vice President for Community Affairs, Dr TP, is keen for me to spend some months doing a transnational collaborative research project on the achievement levels of Black Boys. Dr TP has also suggested that colleagues from Harvard University could possibly be involved in the project. It is intended that the study will focus on strategies that have recently been successfully employed in the States to raise the achievement levels of Black Boys. Also, the study has implications for working class boys irrespective of their ethnicity, who as a group are also academically underachieving. In order for the research to be undertaken, it will depend on funding from external sources and I am tentatively exploring this already.

Comments on the UK-USA Link

I believe it is imperative that there should be continued links between the UK and USA because they have similar issues regarding teacher training and education in general. Also, collaboration between the two countries is necessary so that good models of education and practice, such as the one implemented at Wheelock College, can be shared and disseminated on both sides of the Atlantic.

Publication Plans

I intend to write up my research for relevant publication. I will focus on training teachers for culturally and linguistically diverse classroom contexts.

Acknowledgement

At this juncture I would like to thank Wheelock College for hosting my visit, the staff of UCET /ACCTE and the contribution from the Stanley Hewett Memorial Trust for their financial support and in making this research possible. I hope that other scholars will be able to benefit from the travel scholarship as I have certainly done.

Dr Carol Tomlin 2003