

Closing the Revolving Door: Year-Long Residency Prepares Preservice Teachers for Urban Schools

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The Urban Student Teacher Advanced Residency (USTAR) Program is a partnership between Texas A&M University (TAMU) and Spring Independent School District. Four EC-6 Education students were selected to participate in the pilot year of the USTAR program. Rather than participating in their traditional senior year at TAMU, these four Education students relocated to Houston, Texas to experience a full year of multicultural teaching in an urban environment during the 2016-2017 academic school year. A survey and follow up interviews near the end of the 2017-2018 school year determined ways in which the USTAR program prepared these teachers for their first year of employment at a Title I school.

Keywords: preservice teachers, urban schools, clinical teaching, teacher preparation

It's no secret that teacher turnover is currently a hot topic in America's education communities and urban school districts (Helfeldt, Capraro, Capraro, Foster, & Carter, 2009). One of the root causes of this "revolving door" in teacher education is a lack of realistic preparation in clinical teaching seminars and a dire need for professional support during the first year of teaching (Ingersoll, 2001). For many of the traditionally trained, White, female pre-service teachers at Texas A&M, clinical teaching experiences happen at a school near the university. Many of these local schools are situated in affluent, suburban neighborhoods. However, most teaching jobs available for first-year teachers are in urban or inner-city schools. Imagine the culture shock when these preservice teachers are hired in urban centers and transition into classrooms with low-performing children placed at-risk, equipped with only their knowledge from limited field experiences in polar-opposite settings. There is such a grand disparity between what they thought teaching would be and what they are actually faced with that many novice teachers leave the district and sometimes the profession (Huisman, Singer, & Catapano, 2010).

These concerns generated the idea of the Urban Student Teaching Advanced Residency (USTAR) program. To help close the revolving door, we must better prepare our preservice teachers with the multicultural and multifaceted teaching experience needed in urban schools. Extended clinical teaching opportunities are known to produce better-prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2014). The theory behind programs such as USTAR is that student teachers fully immersed in the urban school setting for a year-long clinical program will be able to better understand and fully grasp the needs and demands of teaching placed-at-risk children. Spring ISD and Texas A&M University created a partnership to give high-performing seniors in the teacher education program an opportunity to experience one full year in a Title I school teaching children in culturally diverse classrooms before becoming a teacher of record.

Literature Review

Darling-Hammond (2014) states that “no amount of coursework can, by itself, counteract the powerful experiential lessons that shape what teachers actually do” (p. 553). Extended clinical teaching experiences are on the rise in American education. Goodwin, Roegman, and Reagan (2016) state that “Urban teacher residency programs are, by definition, clinically rich, given the extensive immersion of preservice teachers (or ‘residents’) in classrooms” (p. 1199). Teachers who participated in extended student teaching programs felt they had a better mentor relationship and more experiences with the inner workings of school systems (Spooner, Flowers, Lambert, & Algozzine, 2008).

Helfeldt et al. (2009) write about the effectiveness of a full-year internship with intensive mentoring specifically in urban schools. In their study, interns began the school year as the actual teacher of record and had the guidance of a full-time teacher-mentor to assist with their growth and development. Participating districts paid interns and interns were evaluated using the teacher evaluation method of that district (Helfeldt et al., 2009). Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Midwest (2017) created a report on a select group of extended (one full school year) clinical teaching programs across the U.S. This report summarizes urban teacher preparation programs from University of Chicago, Wayne State University, Boettcher Teacher Residency Program, Boston Teacher Residency Program, and Georgia State University among other programs without an urban focus. Of the twelve programs that catered to urban school experiences, most of the programs were post-baccalaureate. The one program offering experiences to college seniors was the iTeachAZ program through Arizona State University. Piloted in 2010, the Senior-Year Residency program gives seniors at Arizona State an additional semester of placement in a school district in Arizona. The program includes 25 school districts, and has both urban and rural foci (REL Midwest, 2017). While this program is similar to USTAR, it lacks a specific focus on preparing preservice teachers for urban school centers.

After a comprehensive study of new, urban school teachers, Huisman et al. (2010) found that “the set of seven themes that emerged from the codes supported the theoretical framework of positioning and led to teacher resiliency. These themes included: significant adult relationships, mentoring others, problem-solving, hope, high expectations, sociocultural awareness, and professional development” (p. 487). The overarching goal of the USTAR program is to provide some, if not all, of these themes needed for a successful first year in the context of a year-long student teaching residency specifically in an urban environment.

USTAR Program Overview

Members of the Spring ISD Office of School Leadership and Texas A&M Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture chose Thompson Elementary School to be the setting for the pilot year of USTAR. Dr. Robert Long, III served as principal for one year prior to the program’s inception and fit the description of the type of leader needed to house this new endeavor. Thompson’s demographics also matched the goals of the program offering a racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse environment in which Texas A&M seniors would complete their year-long residency (see *Figure 1*).

	Campus	District	State
Attendance Rate (2015-16)	96.5%	94.2%	95.8%
Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity			
African American	42.6%	40.1%	12.6%
Hispanic	37.2%	44.1%	52.4%
White	3.1%	8.9%	28.1%
American Indian	0.9%	2.1%	0.4%
Asian	15.1%	3.0%	4.2%
Pacific Islander	0.3%	0.4%	0.1%
Two or More Races	0.7%	1.4%	2.2%
Enrollment by Student Group			
Economically Disadvantaged	70.7%	68.5%	59.0%
English Language Learners	35.4%	23.0%	18.9%
Special Education	6.9%	7.9%	8.8%
Mobility Rate (2015-16)	14.3%	23.1%	16.2%

Figure 1: 2016-2017 Data from Texas Education Agency School Report Card for Thompson Elementary (2017)

Milner (2014) utilizes a framework defining three types of urban school districts: *Urban intensive* includes large cities most people think of as “inner-city” with a population over 1 million. *Urban emergent* districts are less than 1 million, are located close to large cities, but share the demographics, challenges, and difficulties of urban intensive districts. *Urban characteristic* schools are beginning to see some of the same demographics and obstacles as in urban schools, but they are located in suburban and rural settings. For the purpose of this study and further research concerning the USTAR program, Thompson Elementary School is considered to be *urban emergent* in that almost 70% of students rank as economically disadvantaged, 35% of students are English Learners, and 98.5% of students at Thompson are children of color. Thompson and Spring ISD are also adjacent to Houston ISD, an urban intensive and the largest school district in the area.

Beginning in August of 2016, four Texas A&M EC-6 Education Majors relocated to the Houston area to begin their year-long teaching residency. Dr. Long and school leadership paired these four students with master educators in various grade levels on campus. They began the first day the teachers started back to work after the summer, which was almost a whole month before their Texas A&M peers began their senior year. They spent every school day of the fall semester at Thompson with the exception of Thursdays when they would commute back to the university in College Station for their senior methods classes.

During their fall semester at Thompson, they observed their master teacher in action during the first crucial weeks of school, helped plan lessons, co-taught lessons, and eventually took sole control of the classroom leading the students as if they were the teacher of record. Their fellow education majors in College Station spent their time in suburban schools only observing for two or three hours at a time. Occasionally the students participating in the traditional senior year had the opportunity to tutor or work in small groups. The USTAR students, however, were paid by Spring ISD to start an after-school tutoring program for the most academically challenged students in fourth and fifth grade, further adding to their experience in building relationships with diverse student populations. They were also paid to substitute teach at Thompson so that they did not have to find part-time employment to support themselves.

In the spring semester, the USTAR students transitioned to a different grade level with a new master teacher for their official Clinical Teaching required by the State of Texas. The

students spent 65 school days following the Texas A&M Clinical Teaching Pacing Guide, which allotted for a gradual release into sole control of the classroom. The USTAR students were often able to accelerate their progress because of the large amount of experience they brought from the fall semester. Their paid after-school tutoring program continued throughout the spring. After completing their Clinical Teaching, USTAR students remained at Thompson for more paid opportunities to substitute teach and tutor students preparing to take the STAAR test in May.

Overall, the teaching and field experience hours gained by the USTAR students during the 2016-2017 school year more than doubled that of their peers in traditional student teaching programs. They acquired exposure in the areas of building student relationships, interacting with parents, interacting with administration, and utilizing curriculum and content. While an extended number of hours looks great on a resume and more exposure to content helps when answering interview questions, we still wanted to know to what extent these four young women felt ready when entering their first year as a teacher of record. We wanted to know how well the USTAR program prepared these educators to teach in an urban school setting.

Conceptual Framework and Methods

The goal of this small study was to determine the level of preparedness for teaching in an urban/multicultural environment the participants possessed at different points in the USTAR program. The study was built around the concept of professional development schools for teacher learning (Collinson & Ferrara, 2014; Hohenbrink & Sherrell, 1994; Lee, 2018). Professional development schools provide an environment to foster supportive school-university partnerships. These partnerships strengthen the teaching practice of clinical, novice, and experienced educators in an effort to benefit the school, students, and community (Lee, 2018).

First, we needed a baseline measure of participants' preparedness *prior* to their senior year at Texas A&M. We also wanted to evaluate the impact on participants of various components of their USTAR experience pertaining to Title I and/or urban school settings. We needed to determine the overall effectiveness of the pilot year of the USTAR program *prior* to beginning the first year as teachers of record and then evaluate the overall effectiveness of the USTAR program *after* participants served as teachers of record for the majority of their first year.

Three of the four students who participated in the pilot year of the USTAR program were White females and one was an African American female. All four students completed a survey during March of 2018 with various questions tied to the objectives of the study. Survey responses were scored using scaled metrics such as "not well at all" to "extremely well" and "not prepared at all" to "extremely prepared." The four USTAR participants also rated the program in terms of their personal and professional development in a series of twelve areas using the ratings of "no impact," "somewhat impactful," or "very impactful." Follow-up interviews in April of 2018 with two of the participants provided further understanding of the survey findings. A predetermined set of open-ended interview questions was used with all participants answering the same questions in a one-on-one setting. We were unable to coordinate schedules with the African-American participant, and one other participant was willing to fill out the online survey but was unavailable for a follow-up interview after multiple attempts to make contact.

Survey Results

The survey began by assessing the participants' level of preparedness prior to beginning their senior year and the USTAR program. When asked how prepared the students felt for teaching before the USTAR program, two participants indicated they felt somewhat prepared, one felt moderately prepared and the fourth participant felt somewhat not prepared. We also

asked “How prepared for managing a classroom did you feel entering your senior year at TAMU, prior to USTAR?” One participant felt somewhat prepared and the other three participants selected the “not prepared” response.

Later in the survey, participants were asked “How prepared did you feel for teaching in an urban environment upon completion of the USTAR, but before starting your 1st year as a teacher of record?” Two participants responded that they felt extremely prepared and two felt somewhat prepared. They were also asked “How prepared did you feel for addressing social-behavioral issues in classrooms upon completion of the USTAR program, but before starting your 1st year as a teacher of record?” All participants selected the “somewhat prepared” response.

When asked “How prepared do you feel in classroom management during your 1st year as a teacher of record?” three participants felt extremely prepared and one responded with “not prepared.” When asked “How well did the USTAR program prepare you for classroom management in urban schools?” three participants answered “extremely well” and one chose “slightly well.”

The survey also asked participants to rate USTAR’s impact on a series of 12 teacher activities and responsibilities. Participants chose either “no impact,” “somewhat impactful,” or “very impactful.” Table 1 shows that three of the four participants felt that USTAR was very impactful in the pedagogical and professional actions of setting expectations at the beginning of the year, working with other cultures, and interacting with coaches and specialists. Three or more participants thought USTAR was somewhat impactful in the areas of differentiating lessons and assessing student data. All USTAR participants felt that the program was very impactful in the area of working with adults from diverse backgrounds and interacting with peers/grade-level teams, and all four participants felt that USTAR was somewhat impactful in designing lessons to meet student needs. All results from this portion of the survey are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses of Impact on 12 Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

#	Actions	No Impact	Somewhat Impactful	Very Impactful
1	Setting expectations in the beginning of the year.	1	0	3
2	Setting up a system of awards and behavioral consequences.	0	2	2
3	Communicating with parents	1	2	1
4	Working adults from diverse background	0	0	4
5	Working in Professional Learning Community groups	0	2	2
6	Working with other cultures	0	1	3
7	Differentiating lessons	0	3	1
8	Interacting with peers/grade-level team	0	0	4
9	Assessing student data	0	3	1
10	Designing lessons to meet student needs	0	4	0
11	Interacting with coaches & specialists	0	1	3
12	Interacting with campus leadership	1	1	2

Follow-Up Interviews

Two USTAR students participated in follow-up interviews based on data from the anonymous online survey. Both participants felt that the classroom and teaching exposure they gained benefitted them during their first year of teaching. Participant A described her year-long residency experience as “real” because she “wasn’t sheltered from anything.” She enjoyed

having the freedom to explore strategies a real teacher would employ but in a lower-risk environment. When comparing her college courses to her residency program, Participant B stated:

There are some situations in the textbook that you can take and you can form to the community you're in, but it's not always going to be realistic. I think that it [USTAR] just gives you so much experience in a real workplace setting. And, it's a safe way to get that experience.

Both participants mentioned the amount of time and exposure to real-world scenarios as their biggest benefit. More specifically, they both felt the USTAR program helped them learn to interact with grade-level teams and peers. Participant A specifically felt she was “treated as a professional on campus.”

Both participants also had the opportunity to see and experience dysfunctional teams.

Participant A said:

I saw dysfunctional teams and I saw what happens when adults undercut each other in front of students and how impactful that is on the entire team and the entire grade level and I definitely didn't want to be a part of that.

Participant B stated:

I think I've learned a lot about conflict resolution just because I've seen a lot of situations where a team, they're all kind of going different directions and so I've learned a lot about making sure that I'm not part of the drama and then making sure that I am contributing in a positive manner.

Participant B also felt that conflicts she witnessed dealt mostly with varying levels of work ethic and dedication to the organization, rather than personality conflicts. When discussing how the program helped to prepare them for interacting with parents from diverse backgrounds, Participant A felt she was as prepared as she could be “without actually being the teacher of record.” Participant B felt that she was not prepared to talk to and build relationships with parents and she struggled with this throughout her first year.

Discussion and Implications

Through the survey and follow up interviews, one theme consistently emerged. The USTAR program gave Texas A&M seniors valuable exposure to urban schools. Participants went from feeling moderately prepared or somewhat unprepared to at least somewhat prepared or even extremely prepared. Three of the four participants felt the program prepared them to teach in urban schools either very well or extremely well. Both participants interviewed mentioned being able to see and experience a multitude of interactions between teachers and students, teachers and grade level peers, teachers and administrators, as well as teachers and parents. Just being able to see and hear these interactions were a benefit to their first year as teacher of record. Another emerging theme, while somewhat negative, was the USTAR participants experiencing dysfunctional teams. Both interviewed participants shared about observing negative adult interactions and applying that to their skill set development. Essentially they were learning “what not to do” in a professional setting.

Based on survey results, the USTAR program has a few areas that need improvement moving forward. All participants felt that the extended clinical teaching was only somewhat impactful on their ability to be able to design lessons to meet student needs. Perhaps Spring ISD

could create additional professional development sessions to help introduce lesson design in a contextual setting specifically for the USTAR participants. Additionally, there is a need for more training for USTAR students in the areas of differentiating lessons, communicating with parents, and assessing student data. This seems to align with the notion that lessons at the university level do not always transfer to practice in the urban school setting. Spring ISD and Texas A&M University will need to collaborate to design additional training sessions to better prepare these future educators.

Although this was a small study of the pilot year of USTAR, the knowledge we gained may also be useful to other teacher residency programs wishing to extend both the length and depth of their students' immersion in urban and diverse school settings. While there is always room for improvement, overall USTAR participants felt the extensive real-world exposure to the kinds of situations and demands they faced in their first year as teachers-of-record in urban settings was valuable. Reducing teacher attrition is a pressing need in the field, and better preparing new teachers who are most likely to get their first jobs in urban and underserved schools for the demanding realities they will face in those positions is especially vital.

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