The "Huggy Bear" Program: An Effective Means of Educating Teacher Education Candidates for Diversity

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Doyin Coker-Kolo and Paulina Kuforiji

Abstract

The “Huggy Bear” program uses a triad approach that links university professors with supervising teachers and teacher candidates to develop effective strategies for mentoring at-risk students. The program is carried out at the primary school level with pupils who have been identified by their teachers as having some deficiencies in social and academic skills. Additionally, the program has a multicultural component. It offers college students the opportunity to work with pupils of different cultural and social economic backgrounds. The “Huggy Bear” program seeks to change how teacher candidates think about working with at-risk students and to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach a diverse student population. Collaboration occurs at three levels, between the college instructor and the school administrators, between teacher candidates and their supervising teachers, and lastly, but most important, between teacher candidates and their mentees. The college students not only learn about multicultural issues in the classroom, but also simultaneously experience the testing of their knowledge, beliefs and principles.

Teacher education programs across the nation are facing the challenge of preparing pre-service teachers to work with students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Darling-Hammond (1997) suggests that future teachers must have more rigorous preparation and more authentic experiences to enable them to cope with the increasing complexities, challenges and diversity of current schools and classrooms.

One challenge is the demographic shift in the composition of the public school students and the increasing diversity in students’ characteristics.

According to McLaughlin and McLeod (1996), in 1990 there were 31 states with at least 25,000 minority language students who spoke a non-English language at home. Additionally, research (Kauchak, Eggen, & Carter, 2002, LeFrancois, 2001) tells us that poverty affects more children under the age of 18 years than any other age group in the United States. Most of these poor children live in small towns and suburban areas. Jones and Black (2001) suggest that approximately 10 percent of children in schools have been diagnosed with a disability which requires special education services. In summarizing the trend of the current societal changes on our schools, Gollnick and Chinn (2002) put it succinctly: “there is rapid, profound and continuous diversifica-
tion of the student population in all areas including racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and social” (p. 2).

Given the enormity of the current demographic changes facing American public schools as enumerated above, schools of education have the responsibility to prepare teachers that can reach out to these children and make them full and productive members of our society. The “Huggy Bear” program is designed to offer teacher candidates early field experience in dealing with diversity in the areas of exceptionality and cultural differences.

Reports indicate that most teachers do not feel adequately prepared to address the diversity of culture and exceptionality in their classrooms. Pre-service teachers are no exception. Barry and Lecher (1995) quoted by Luft (1999) stated that student teachers are aware of the issues of cultural diversity yet feel uncertain about their preparation to work with students from backgrounds different than theirs. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher education identifies diversity as its third standard for evaluating member institutions. There are three ratings under this standard: “unacceptable,” “acceptable,” and “target.” The “target” which is the ideal for all institutions, identifies NCATE’s expectations for compliance. It suggests that each school of education “in its curriculum, field experience and clinical practice provides experience for its teacher candidates that will enable them to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and dispositions related to diversity” (2002, p.13). This suggests that schools of education must make the conscientious effort not only to teach their students to be culturally aware but to train and provide them with real life experiences that will change their attitude, disposition and behaviors.

This paper focuses on a model program, (The “Huggy Bear” Program), which provides an early experience for teacher candidates to test their knowledge of multicultural education, and to demonstrate the ability to deal with differences among people in a real life situation. This program also illustrates the benefits that accrue when educators from colleges of education and those in P–12 institutions develop a common, shared vision of teaching and learning and dare to put it into practice.

**Theoretical Framework**

The active, collaborative and constructivist nature of the “Huggy Bear” program rest on certain theoretical frameworks. These include the work of Benjamin Bloom on effective teaching. Bloom (1984) recommended one-on-one tutorial as the most effective teaching strategy in promoting an increase in students’ academic performance. In his research (quoted by LeFrancois, 2000), Bloom asserted that “an average student paired with a good tutor can be expected to achieve at somewhere around the 98th percentile in a group of comparable students taught in a conventional classroom setting” (p. 230).

The “Huggy Bear” program also draws from the theory of Discovery Learning by Jerome Bruner. Bruner is a cognitivist theorist who believes that students learn best when they organize and construct their own learning instead of having information presented to them in its final form (LeFrancois, 2000). Discovery learning is time consuming and challenging but offers students the best opportunity to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, the capabilities that are essential to any teaching-learning
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situation. The program requires that teacher candidates apply sound pedagogical principles including assessment, lesson plan design, and collaboration to address a variety of needs of young children in P-12 schools.

Lastly, an invaluable theoretical premise for the development of the "Huggy Bear" program is the recommendation made by Darling Hammond (1997) that teacher candidates should be exposed to more intense and authentic early field experiences to enable them to cope with the increasing complexities, challenges and diversity of current school and classrooms. These researches taken together serve as the basis for the holistic and integrative nature of the "Huggy Bear" Program.

Program Description

The "Huggy Bear" program has been used as the field experience component of a three credit hour undergraduate Multicultural Education course, but could easily be adapted to any other undergraduate course in the teacher education program. The course description of Georgia Southern State University reads “a course designed to acquaint the pre-service teacher with the characteristics of students who represent the cultural diversity found in the public schools of today and with the techniques of developing programs to facilitate those students during the educational process” (Georgia Southwestern State University Bulletin, 2000-2002, p.195). In this three-hour course, students meet twice a week for class lectures and activities, and then spend one class meeting in the field for the “Huggy Bear” program. Each class meeting usually lasts an hour. Although most courses in the college of education have a field experience component, the “Huggy Bear” program is unique because it offers true collaboration, on-site support and creative experiences to teacher candidates. As an embedded program, it serves as a vehicle through which students demonstrate in a practical setting the knowledge of diversity learned in class.

Moreover, the “Huggy Bear” program integrates the public school with the university by bringing the school counselor, school administrators, cooperating teachers, university professor and teacher candidates together to develop strategies for mentoring at-risk students. While the teacher candidates undoubtedly gain useful hands-on experience in lesson planning and tutoring, the ultimate beneficiaries of the program are the primary school pupils who are taught the adaptive skills necessary to survive in school and later on in life. There are four important participants, whose roles are not mutually exclusive.

First is the university professor who develops the course, with input from a P-2 counterpart especially in designing the practicum. The college instructor is also available at the school site during the weekly “Huggy Bear” meetings. Next is the meeting with the public school representa-
tive (usually the counselor) who liaises with the cooperating teachers in identifying the special needs students and matching them with the college students. He or she also conducts an orientation for the entire team. The next key players are the cooperating teachers who identify the students needing extra help, provide necessary background information on the pupils, seek parental permission, and help to set expectations for what needs to be accomplished in meeting each pupil’s needs. The final important participants are the teacher candidates who are responsible for applying course materials, planning and implementing the lessons, and conducting other activities necessary to meet the special needs of their mentees.

**Implementation**

The field experience program usually begins after covering foundation topics in multicultural education, for example, age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity and culture. This occurs prior to the mid-term break. Students continue to take classes simultaneously with the field experience, spending one period in class and one out in the field. Teacher candidates are assigned one or two pupils but not more than two to allow for a one-on-one relationship to occur. The P-12 students are randomly selected from among a group of students considered “at risk” for various reasons by their teachers. The college students, referred to as “Huggy Bear” tutors, and their mentees all meet in the same room. This classroom often has little or no furniture so students have to be creative in designing their own workspaces in such a way that there will be limited distraction from the other groups. The university professor and sometimes the counselor are always on hand to offer support. The task of the teacher candidates in teaching the young students varies, and joint goals are set for each child by the teacher candidates and the cooperating teachers. Sometimes the teacher candidates organize group activities to teach teamwork and other social skills to their mentees. Additionally, teacher candidates engage in tutoring, relationship building, social skills, games, story telling, and celebrations of special holidays. Traditional events such as St. Patrick’s Day, Black History Month, Chinese New Year and other cultural celebrations that fall into the mentoring period are usually observed, with students choosing whether or not to participate. Instructional strategies used depend on the needs of the mentee and the imagination of the tutor/candidate. There are no strict guidelines, so students are free to be creative.

The college professor and the on-site coordinator cover for mentors who are absent. This ensures that no child enrolled in the program is ever without a mentor. On the last day of the program, the school counselor and the on-site coordinator usually have a send-off party for the tutors. Cooperating teachers and school administrators are usually invited. The mentees will present certificates of participation to their mentors and children usually give them a little gift in return.

Teacher candidates are expected to record their day-to-day experiences in a journal following criteria specified in the course syllabus. A debriefing usually takes place in class to reflect on the field experience and to ask for suggestions to further improve the program. Videotapes of the sessions, if available, are also critiqued so that students can reflect on their skills and dispositions and their interaction with their mentees.
Conclusion

The “Huggy Bear” program as a field experience in undergraduate teacher education program is uniquely set to be a model program for teaching collaboration and integration of theory with practice. It is not like other field experience programs in which students are sent off to observe various classrooms and document their observation. Instead, it teaches teacher candidates how to collaborate with other adults, plan and teach lessons, gather and manage resources, and manage students that are different from them in many ways. They learn all these to demonstrate these skills very early in their teacher education program. The “Huggy Bear” program also requires teacher candidates to teach social skills in addition to the academics. The use of one-on-one instruction and occasional small group activities ensure that each mentee has his/her special needs addressed. Cooperating teachers view the program as an additional resource for their “special needs students” and as an opportunity to mentor the teacher candidates. The collaboration between the university professor, school administrator and cooperating teachers helps to dispel the myth that schools of education still operate in isolation. The relationship built actually serves as a foundation for collaborative efforts in other areas.

Finally, the impact of the “Huggy Bear” program on the self-esteem of the P–12 pupils is tremendous (Lefrancois, 1999). They enjoy the one-on-one attention from their mentors, the improvement they see in their work, and the fun activities that they get to do outside of class work.

References


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