



EXCEED: Excellence in Elementary Education – a Program Transformation

Barbara R. Ridener¹

Florida Atlantic University, United States of America¹

Abstract

Florida Atlantic University's (FAU) EXCEED program began through a Florida Department of Education (FDOE) initiative to create Centers of Excellence in Elementary Education throughout the state. This paper presents a summary of the steps that supported the collaboration and transformation of the program from a program focused on teacher actions to one that measured success by student impact. Its focused approach for developing teachers for elementary grades has become a model for implementing systematic change through extensive, iterative collaboration and evaluation. EXCEED's teacher preparation improves the knowledge and skills of elementary education candidates to meet partner school district expectations and accelerate candidate practices. The EXCEED program implementation included a coordinated effort between FAU's College of Education, Department of Teaching and Learning, Broward and Palm Beach County Public Schools, FAU Lab Schools, Learning Sciences International and New Teacher Center. The key outcomes of the EXCEED program are: redesigned elementary education degree that includes both English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and reading endorsements; developed and delivered new content courses in mathematics, science and social science to improve elementary education candidate content knowledge; developed and delivered new classroom management and reading/language arts supervised practicum courses; revised technology, multicultural and methods courses; enhanced clinical experiences through improved placement practices, observation and evaluation tools, feedback and coaching processes, and professional learning for clinical educators and university supervisors; enhanced of collaboration and communication with district partners; improved data collection and utilization to determine student teacher and clinical educator effectiveness; increased infusion of instructional practices aligned to the districts' evaluation model in elementary education practicum coursework; enhanced selection and preparation of clinical educators and university supervisors; and implemented systemic continuous improvement processes for program improvements.

Keywords: *Teacher preparation, Elementary Education, Collaboration, Program Change, Effectiveness.*

1.0 Introduction

Florida Atlantic University's (FAU) Excellence in Elementary Education (EXCEED) program began as a Florida Department of Education (FDOE) grant initiative for developing and implementing systematic change in elementary education teacher preparation programs. The EXCEED program implementation included coordinated efforts between FAU's Colleges of Education, Sciences, and Arts and Letters, the Department of Teaching and Learning, Broward and Palm Beach County Public Schools, Learning Sciences International, and New Teacher Center. The school districts are urban-suburban Title I school systems with extensive diversity of learners and among the largest school systems in the United States.[5]

The EXCEED program had the following goals:

- Improve candidate knowledge in the increasingly rigorous requirements and prepare candidates for graduate coursework;
- Identify and train highly effective teachers to serve as cooperating teachers;
- Use the partner school district evaluation models to document pre-service candidates' instructional effectiveness; and
- Develop data-driven performance feedback systems to provide for continuous program improvement.

2.0 Program Description

Data collection provided a foundation to support program changes that deepened candidate content knowledge. Content teams comprised of Teaching and Learning content faculty, content experts from Palm Beach and Broward school districts, and faculty from the Colleges of Arts and Letters, Science



and the Honors College were formed for the subjects of reading, mathematics, science and social studies. With the goal of accelerating teacher candidate impact on student achievement, the teams developed three new content courses and content pre and post assessments: one in each of mathematics, science, and social studies. The courses were designed to deepen candidate content knowledge prior to content methods courses. Related standards based content tests, were created and administered at the start (and end) of each content course to assist the faculty in determining content gaps and guide instruction. In response to partner district requests, a new literacy supervised practicum course was created so candidates would receive reading endorsement upon program completion. Additional feedback from graduates led to the development or revision of courses in classroom management and instructional technology.

To improve clinical experiences, the Marzano Causal Evaluation Model became the observation and assessment tool for practicum students and student teachers since it is the teacher evaluation model used in both districts. The feedback to our teacher candidates shifted from being teacher directed to feedback that focused on the impact of their instruction on student progress and attainment of learning targets.

With changes in the observation and feedback tools, considerable professional learning and support for the observers was needed. Clinical educators completed 6.5 days of professional learning. This included 3.5 days in the Marzano framework, strategies for monitoring, support for student teachers on using standards to create lessons, and in scoring and feedback to appropriately assess the teacher candidates' performance. Another three (3) days was dedicated to New Teacher Center research-based coaching practices and tools to analyze student work, engage in strategic questioning and inquiry, utilize appropriate facilitative or directive strategies, and use their Collaborative Assessment Log.

Through the implementation, we deepened the relationships with our district partners, and improved communication and commitment to the development of the teacher candidates through monthly meetings, sharing of data, and ideas and strategies to improve practices within the district and the college. The project afforded us a district liaison position in each of the districts. The liaisons served as key players in our program enhancements.

A critical piece in assessing the impact of the program was analysis of observation data. Using LSI's iObservation tool, we were able to assess and monitor our candidates with greater agility and depth. We analyzed scores, comments made for growth, and progress and deploy support for individual candidates or incorporate seminars for the cohort growth. We incorporated regular reviews of program data to determine the continued impact on K-5 student outcomes.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The EXCEED framework was grounded in several research-based principles beginning with the work of Robert Marzano [3] on the domains of effective teaching that support teacher growth, development and improved performance. Marzano contends that to be effective, educators must examine every component of the teaching process with equal resolve. EXCEED's design also reflects the critical work examined in John Hattie's Visible Learning for Teachers [2], a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses in education. This focused on ongoing learning and seeing impact as a result of evidence acquired from the learners. Both of these works provided foundation for our continuous collection of data based on the perspectives of both teacher candidates and students.

Research also shows that the most important influence on student achievement is teacher quality. Teacher preparation programs play a critical role in developing teaching knowledge and skills to produce improved learning outcomes for K-12 students. In a comprehensive report of teacher preparation: Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do, Darling-Hammond and Bransford[1] suggest that coursework in pedagogy has a stronger effect on teacher performance when the courses are combined with courses in content areas. Given this research, the results of surveys from student teachers, clinical educators, and faculty, the EXCEED program focused on addressing the gaps in content through collaborative courses and content assessment design and implementation.

4.0 Assessment Framework and Implementation

The EXCEED program was formally assessed by two primary frameworks. As a grant project, the FDOE used the EDI Assessment Framework for self-assessment of the project development and implementation. Quarterly, we assessed our program in relation to the program goals to determine our success in the implementation of strategies aligned to each goal, and to determine issues or gaps in our capacity to accomplish the goals. At the onset of the EXCEED program, we identified the majority



of the program goals as needing considerable more support or resources to accomplish the goal or the goal as in progress. One goal in particular was rated as needing far greater collaboration and commitment from our district partners. At the end of full program implementation, three goals were rated as achieving our desired outcomes and the goal requiring structural changes that included the districts was improved but identified that we would continue to work with our partners to attain completion.

Annually during the grant period (three years), we underwent a thorough review conducted by an outside entity, TPI-US [4]. These reviews were more comprehensive in nature and included a research-based framework focused on four judgment areas:

1. Quality of Selection:
2. Quality of Content Knowledge and Teaching Methods
3. Quality of Clinical Placement, Feedback, and Candidate Performance
4. Program Performance Management

The reports generated by TPI-US from Year 1 to Year 3 reflected tremendous growth and improvement. The Year 1 inspection report rated the EXCEED program as 3 (good) in quality of selection for teacher candidates and 2 (needs improvement) in: quality of content knowledge and teaching skills; quality of clinical placement, feedback; and quality of program performance management. By Year 3, the program was rated a 3 (good) in all four categories. Given that the review process was quite rigorous, it not only provided an overall evaluation but contributed to the process of meaningful continuous improvement of the overall elementary education preparation program.

5.0 Summary

As of the end of the fourth full year of implementation, the following key outcomes of implementing the EXCEED program have been accomplished:

- redesigned elementary education degree that includes both English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and reading endorsements;
- developed and delivered new content courses in mathematics, science and social science to improve elementary education candidate content knowledge;
- developed and delivered new classroom management and reading/language arts supervised practicum courses;
- revised technology, multicultural and methods courses;
- enhanced clinical experiences through improved placement practices, observation and evaluation tools, feedback and coaching processes, and professional learning for clinical educators and university supervisors;
- enhanced collaboration and communication with district partners;
- improved data collection and utilization to determine student teacher and clinical educator effectiveness;
- increased infusion of instructional practices aligned to the districts' evaluation model in elementary education practicum coursework;
- enhanced selection and preparation of clinical educators and university supervisors; and
- implemented systemic continuous improvement processes for program improvements.

The results achieved from EXCEED provide concrete examples of what to expect in the process of implementing a comprehensive program reform.

After four years of supported implementation, the challenge is to sustain involvement without financial incentives. By embedding the new courses into the elementary education program, the department has the ability to sustain the programmatic changes designed to enhance the candidates' content knowledge. The program has funded the LSI iObservation system and the New Teacher Center tools for multiple years to maintain the positive impact of these observation, evaluation and coaching tools. To sustain the professional learning associated with the Marzano model and coaching strategies, we invested in preparing six individuals: two district liaisons, two faculty and two university supervisors who became trainers in the Marzano model and New Teacher Center coaching strategies and tools.

The content teams supported by the EXCEED grant provide continued collaboration, consistency of expectations, improved coursework and communication. The current structure allows for continuous learning and improvements. We are working to continue the district partner collaboration and have embedded continuous improvement activities within faculty meetings

A new Field Experience Coordinator was hired within the Department in the spring of 2017 to coordinate the professional learning and development of the clinical educators and university



supervisors. The Field Experience Coordinator is responsible for maintaining the collaboration with the district partners and connecting practice to coursework through the sharing of information, data and videos from the field with department faculty. These activities facilitate ongoing analysis of program changes. None the less, we still seek ways to continue to enhance our courses and program.

References

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