

Learning How to Teach in the Inner City

The Houston Teaching Academy prepares new teachers for inner-city classrooms while simultaneously giving practicing teachers access to new research and instructional strategies.

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Is it possible to attract talented new or second-career teachers to the inner-city classroom? If so, how should we prepare them to overcome the rigors of this teaching environment? Can such preparation also help experienced teachers in inner-city schools improve their own classroom performance? These are daunting questions, to say the least, but urgent ones in today's urban educational environment, and central to the mission of the Houston Teaching Academy (HTA).

For the past three years, the Academy has been the site of a project to attract new teachers to inner-city classrooms. Sponsored by the University of Houston College of Education and the Houston Independent School District, the project involves elementary and middle school teachers, student teachers, and university supervisors. Each semester, 10 to 20 student teachers learn to work with inner-city children and their families. The project has enhanced the classroom experiences of

scores of children as teachers participate in studies of new classroom management and instructional strategies.

To get this school/college partnership off the ground, we had to create a safe and structured environment. The school we chose to house the Academy has an ethnically diverse population (60 percent black, 35 percent Hispanic, 5 percent other) and combines an elementary and middle school on a single campus. Primarily children from the immediate neighborhood attend this school but, since it is a fine arts magnet school, students from more affluent areas of the city also come here.

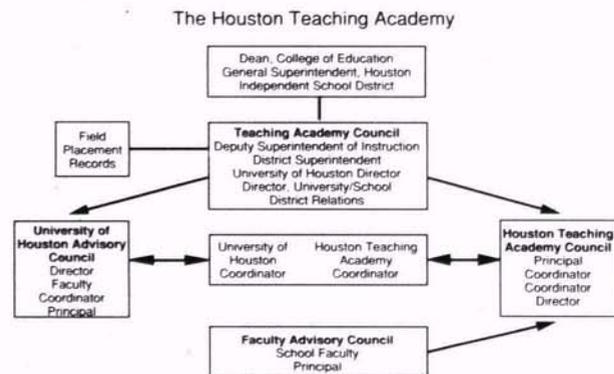
In the winter of 1987, with school board approval, we closed this school, then reopened it, still as a fine arts magnet school, to establish a professional development school for teachers. Administrative leaders from the district and the university outlined qualifications for the Academy principal and teaching staff, and worked out budget details.

The organizational structure of the Academy includes a school site council and a university-based council (see fig. 1). The school site council meets weekly to discuss issues such as matching student teachers with cooperating teachers and the management of researchers and observers within the school. We modify the program on the basis of both councils' weekly and semester evaluations of its effectiveness. The university-based council includes faculty who teach courses or conduct research at the Academy, as well as those involved in the placement and supervision of student teachers.

Professors recruit prospective student teachers. Academy classroom teachers and former student teachers find others through visits to College of Education methods classes. For instance, we have



FIGURE 1

HOUSTON TEACHING ACADEMY ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN


placed university students enrolled in math methods courses in Academy classrooms as tutors. Student teachers often respond in stunned disbelief to the life experiences of these children. But as the semester wears on, they develop respect for the ability of the children and their families to survive and learn in this difficult environment.

The Triad Seminar

A "triad seminar"—named for the three participant elements, university supervisors, cooperating classroom teachers, and student teachers—is the primary vehicle for both instructional management and educational research. Once a week, student teachers meet with their university supervisors and cooperating classroom teachers to discuss lesson plans and instructional problems. These seminars focus on the myriad difficulties involved in managing an inner-city classroom.

De-stressing a class of inner-city students on Monday morning after a dicey weekend on the block, for example, can present a formidable classroom management problem. Classroom teachers describe and discuss

the management techniques they commonly use to reacclimate their students to learning. One such method calls for early morning journal writing, or, for the very young, picture drawing.

Student teachers use instructional vignettes in the seminars as case studies for discussion, comparing and contrasting these with daily classroom realities. They also discuss videotapes of teachers using a variety of instructional and management techniques in relation to their appropriateness to this school setting. For example, writing names on the board to manage asocial behavior may not be as practical as proximity control in inner-city classrooms. Similarly, teacher-directed guided practice using hands-on activities is likely to be more effective than independent practice.

Cooperating teachers join university supervisors in conducting seminar lessons on topics as diverse as interpersonal relations, the parent connection, community relations, and even such basics as keeping a grade book. They make every effort, through the use of anecdote, analogy, and metaphor, to help student teachers learn to link lesson content to the everyday reality of their students' lives.

Assessing Change in Teachers

Since a primary goal of research at the Academy is to see how instructional and leadership behavior changes during the semester, university researchers posed the following questions:

1. During the student teaching practicum, do Academy student teachers improve their classroom organizing skills, their interactive instructional strategies, and their behavior management skills more than control-group student teachers do?

2. Do supervising teachers improve their instructional strategies and behavior management during the semester?

3. Do student teachers model their instructional techniques on those of their supervisory teachers?

4. Do student teachers from the Academy choose to teach—and to remain—in inner-city schools?

5. According to principals' reports, do Academy graduates rate higher in their first year of teaching than other first-year teachers?

6. Do supervising teachers grow professionally and choose to remain at the Academy?

7. How are the behavior and academic performance of children at the Academy affected by contact with so many student teachers and tutors?

Researchers used classroom observations, questionnaires, interviews, and journals to examine these questions in a sample of 65 experimental and 20 control student teachers.

Observations indicated that Academy student teachers changed their instructional behaviors (to a statistically significant degree) so that they spent more class time instructing and less time managing students. They increased their use of higher-order questions and positive support. They probed and guided students, rather than simply correcting wrong answers. In the control group, the only statistically significant change was negative: subjects reduced their use of clarifying questions.

The cooperating teacher whose students had the least off-task behavior had the student teacher with the least off-task student behavior by the end of the semester.

Academy student teachers learned to reduce off-task behavior in a commonly rowdy environment. This result reflects the purpose of the overall program—to help teachers learn to manage effectively in inner-city schools. According to the observations of cooperating teachers, their own management of off-task behavior also improved.

In the weekly seminars, Academy teachers indicated that having a student teacher made them feel more professional and prompted them to examine their own instructional practices. These teachers currently report professional growth in several areas—they have all enrolled in university courses offered at the school site. Eleven have presented papers at national and regional educational conferences. Another eleven, including some of the same teachers, have taken the course on how to teach the workshop/seminars and are qualified to disseminate the Academy model to other school sites.

Observation data indicated that student teachers did model themselves after their cooperating teachers. The cooperating teacher whose students had the least off-task behavior, for example, had the student teacher with the least off-task student behavior by the end of the semester. And, as might be expected, the same held true for the teacher whose students had the most off-task behavior. (In this sad case, the student teacher's observed ability to manage behavior had actually decreased by the end of the semester.)

A Successful Program

In 1990, the Academy received the Association of Teacher Educators' Distinguished Program in Teacher Education Award. Ninety percent of Academy student teachers said in an exit questionnaire they would welcome a teaching assignment in an inner-city school. Follow-up interviews indicate that 85 percent at present work in inner-city or multi-ethnic environments. Furthermore, when principals who had hired Academy graduates were

contacted, eleven gave the Academy graduates "fives" on a five-point scale. One who had hired four Academy grads ranked all four higher than his other first-year teachers.

An Academy student teacher, Maryanne Miner, was chosen 1988/89 Student Teacher of the Year by the Texas Education Association. Miner was hired as a classroom teacher at the Academy, choosing to stay on in the inner city, when any number of opportunities were available to her.

We examined the Academy's effect on the children in the school by comparing scores on the Texas Education Assessment of Minimal Skills for the 3rd, 5th, and 7th grades. At the end of the third year of the study, students at all three levels showed improvement in math, reading, and writing. Eighty-six percent passed math tests at 3rd grade, 90 percent at 5th grade, and 92 percent at 7th grade levels. These results were better than any previous years.

So it is possible to prepare student teachers for careers in inner-city classrooms. The rigors of this teaching environment can be minimized through collaboration, cooperation, and action research. In such an environment, experienced teachers appear to grow professionally as well, improving their own classroom skills, while serving as models for their less-experienced colleagues. □

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