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ANNOTATION

Pusateri, Phillip Anthony, Herman Eric Clark, and Elizabeth Ann Goodwin. “Nativity Miguel Model Schools’ Leader Perceptions: A Study of the Challenges Encountered by Volunteer Teachers and the Strategies Used to Address These Challenges.” EdD dissertation, Saint Louis University, 2014. 170 pp.

We have here another dissertation/doctoral project studying the movement in the USA of small private middle schools addressing the urgent, and too often unmet, educational needs of youngsters from low-income families in urban settings. This study concerns NativityMiguel model schools (NM), a loose network of “small independent middle schools serving students from low income backgrounds” that has grown from 21 schools in 2000 to 62 schools in 2016 (3). The schools emerged out of a perception that USA public schools in urban areas are failing the economically poor (18); and, therefore, “urban students from lower-income backgrounds . . . comprise the bulk of students attending NM model schools” (31) since the model was “founded in order to provide a quality education that allows empowered students to break the cycle of poverty in the United States” (80). The schools’ funding model – primarily philanthropic – has encouraged the active engagement of significant numbers of volunteer teachers.

The problem statement of this study, as articulated by the doctoral project team, is that there “is an insufficient body of knowledge regarding the challenges encountered by volunteer teachers in NativityMiguel model schools, as perceived by principals, as well as an insufficient body of knowledge regarding strategies employed and recommendations made by principals to address these challenges” (6, 53, 65, 77). The authors, therefore, surveyed NM school leaders to gather data about these matters (12).

The methodology employed in doing this was that of “a problem-based learning project model” of inquiry (1, 8, 62). What is unique to this dissertation is the approach at Saint Louis University wherein a team, as in this case, can jointly work collaboratively on an EdD doctoral project.

The project team identified the following issues as important vis-à-vis volunteer teachers in NM schools: classroom management, pedagogical skills, content knowledge, culturally responsive teaching, stress management, and communication skills (8, 62). They also identified the following strategies for addressing these challenges: new teacher orientation programs, specific training of volunteers pertaining to the specific challenges being encountered, mentoring, strategic and adaptive assignment of duties for new teachers, and ongoing observation and feedback (8, 62).

There appears to have been prior consensus on the part of the team that employing volunteer teachers at NM model schools poses a challenge. Due to budgetary constraints, NM schools employ less costly “alternatively certified and uncertified volunteer teachers” in classroom and after-school programs (18). The authors also reference, however, a study by L. Mickey Fenzel (*Improving Urban Middle Schools: Lessons from the Nativity Schools* (2009) that indicates that

“volunteer teachers positively contributed to student learning” and their “dispositions of compassion, motivation, energy, freedom, and youth” help them “create a stable, caring, learning environment” in the schools (18).

The literature review conducted by the authors as part of the project focuses, more or less, on the challenges for new or volunteer teachers who do not have much, if any, prior academic teacher preparation or experience and on successful strategies for helping them in this work in the belief that improved volunteer teacher effectiveness will lead to improved student outcomes (80). The literature review indicated that “the two greatest teacher-level factors that most positively affect student achievement” are the importance of pedagogical and classroom management skills (2, 10, 20, 57). It was noted that the “most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher” (19) and that “teachers and teaching quality are the two most pertinent predictors of student achievement” (39).

Furthermore, literature review data on urban youngsters from low-income families indicated that they need prepared and experienced teachers, which volunteers are not. The lack of well-prepared teachers compounds problems with students from disadvantaged backgrounds (1-2, 18, 57-58). The literature review indicated that good strategies for assisting beginning teachers include: good mentoring (41-43); strategic and adaptive assignment of duties (43-44); ongoing observation, feedback, and guided reflection (44-46, 59); and, possibly, the support of a professional learning community model (46-48). In addition, help with culturally responsive teaching (CRT) often leads to greater achievement by students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (31, 33, 57-58).

The importance of subject-area content knowledge (57-58), stress management/self-care (57), and communication skills (57) are also noted; and the literature review suggested that while new teacher orientation, mentoring, and strategic and adaptive assignment of duties are good strategies when working with new teachers (60), it is also important when working with new teachers serving low-income background students to develop teacher awareness of students’ affective and developmental needs and to ensure that high expectations are in place and communicated to students. This creates a mindset for achievement (51-52, 61).

The three authors voice a concern about inadequate volunteer preparation (inadequate induction programs, pre-service training, certification, and prior teaching experience) on the part of NM volunteer teachers (4), noting that volunteer teachers at NM model schools are often uncertified and/or lacking in pre-service training or experience (36). It seems to them that, among the 65 network schools, leaders are often left on their own to address volunteer teacher induction and ongoing support (5, 39) and that there is a need for a vehicle within the NM network to better share best practices.

The project team contacted 169 present and former leaders from the network of NM model schools, of whom 74 responded. Sixty of these indicated that they had experience supervising volunteer teachers; and so these 60 created the pool of the study (64).

The interviews of NM school leaders indicated that within this network the key challenges for volunteer teachers were classroom management (90.2%), pedagogical skills (75.6%), and stress

management (75%). Cultural literacy (57.5%), communication skills (45%), and content knowledge (36.6%) were of lesser concern (66).

Relative to strategies, the interviews revealed that for NM model schools the most effective strategies (69, 78) employed in accompanying volunteer teachers were mentoring (82.8%) and ongoing observation, feedback, and guided reflection (79.3%). The least used strategy was the professional learning communities model of accompaniment (46-48, 73-74, 78).

A few NM school leaders recommended, as strategies, partnering with organizations and local universities that support and help with volunteer teacher development (75-76). Another suggestion was for a more “strategic and adaptive assignment of duties for volunteer teachers” or their engagement as “supplemental teachers” rather than as “lead teachers” (76). It should be noted that while the focus of the study was on the challenges faced by volunteer teachers in NM model schools, some volunteers in NM schools have already been assigned other roles such as teacher aides and after-school coordinators (88).

Areas of possible follow-up to this doctoral project, proposed by the project team, are rather numerous (80-88); and only a few of them will be included here. Perhaps future research could (1) correlate academic outcomes vis-à-vis the strategies used by school leaders, (2) interview volunteers vis-à-vis their own perception of challenges and effectiveness of strategies used in assisting them, (3) interview students and families vis-à-vis their perception of challenges and effectiveness of strategies employed to help volunteers, and (4) involve actual observation of volunteer classroom teachers for a “greater depth of understanding of the volunteer teachers’ challenges.”