Bridging Theory and Practice within an Alternative Teacher Education Program

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Abstract: This study examines the commitments of an alternative teacher education program in linking theory and practice, one of the most prominent problems of the field. This qualitative phenomenological study drew from semi-structured interviews with seven faculty members and associate instructors, electronic surveys with seven program students, participant observation and field notes in seminar sessions, one program faculty meeting, and one community meeting, and curriculum materials. The findings suggest that the design of the program and the roles and (inter)actions of the stakeholders within the program created a dialectical interplay. Linked with this interplay, Teachers' Society provided a setting for collaborative learning during which theory is extracted from experience.

Keywords: democratic teacher education, early practicum, collaborative learning, theory-practice relationship.

Introduction

Bridging the gap between theory and practice has long been a challenge in teacher education (Carter, 2023; Deng, 2004; Husebo, 2012; McGarr et al. 2017; Tilson, 2017). Handling this relationship effectively is emphasized whenever improvement of teacher education is the concern. The related literature (e.g., Allen, 2009; Britzman, 2003; Clayton et al., 2014; Dewey, 1904; Loughran, 2006) provides numerous accounts of this critical relationship. Offering their unique way of approach to this tricky but vital relationship, alternative teacher education programs can provide insights regarding the complexities of the critical process of student-teaching as well as ideas about how to handle these challenges.

This study sought to examine the theory-practice relationship within Teachers' Society[1], an alternative teacher education program at a state university in the Midwestern United States, in order to understand how this program contributed to the process of bridging theory and practice. In Teachers' Society, the emphasis on pre-service teacher's choice of mentors and the length of time they spend in their field experience is unique (Damico et al., 2019). Unlike the traditional

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[1]Pseudonyms are used for all individual and place names to protect confidentiality.

teacher education which supposes that students of teaching need to be prepared before being sent out to schools, Teachers' Society provides an effective restructure of teacher education (Loughran, 2006; Russell, 2002). The details and complexities of the processes pre-service teachers are engaged within the unique structure of the program can offer insights towards the longstanding challenge in teacher education. Two specific research questions guided the investigation: 1) What are the commitments of the Teachers' Society program to bridge theory and practice in teacher education? 2) What main processes do pre-service teachers engage in the Teachers' Society towards bridging theory and practice?

In presenting Teachers' Society's commitments to link theory and practice and the processes pre-service teachers are engaged, this study is organized into three parts. Firstly, previous research is reviewed and the study's conceptual framework is described. Secondly, the methodology and reconstructive analysis (Carspecken, 1996) are recounted to present descriptive and analytic findings focused on the way Teachers' Society creates a setting for self-directed learning within a community through three fundamentals of the program, namely, the seminar, apprenticeship, and portfolio. Finally, the findings of the data are presented in light of the conceptual framework. The focus of the study throughout is on understanding the multiple dynamics of Teachers' Society towards guiding pre-service teachers in their self-directed process of extracting theory by reflecting on their own and their peers' experiences. In the following literature review, the pairs of theory-practice, episteme-phronesis, and implicit-explicit knowledge are loosely associated with overlapping meanings. As Teachers' Society serves both undergraduate and graduate students, the students in the program also include practicing teachers working towards their master's degrees. However, for consistency, all the students enrolled in the program will be referred to as "pre-service teachers."

Context and Literature Review

Student-teaching is one of the most critical aspects of pre-service teacher education programs in that it is the process in which pre-service teachers are introduced to teaching. This critical phase of preparation for teaching requires pre-service teachers to master a wide array of complex skills (e.g., explicitly creating goals and objectives, developing and sequencing effective activities, and creating appropriate evaluation procedures as well as implementing lesson plans effectively). Although it seems preplanned and linear (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Resch & Schrittesser, 2023), the related literature demonstrates that lesson planning and instruction often tend to be cyclical and recursive (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Cochran-Smith, 2004). Due to the recursive nature of this complex process, student teaching cannot be reduced to mastery of bits of information and knowledge that constitutes survival kit skills. This superficial and unrealistic perspective of student teaching will only broaden the theory-practice gap – one of the most prominent problems of teacher education. For several decades, experts in the field of teacher education (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flories, 1991; Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986; Schön, 1983) cautioned that the desired student-teaching is not a process during which theory is translated into isolated plans and practice. Rather it is intended to create opportunities for pre-service teachers to (re)develop "theories *of* practice" or "theories *in* practice" while constructing knowledge and curricula through ongoing concrete interactions with their students (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 48).

Conceptualizing the impact of the difference between episteme and phronesis in teacher education is essential in shaping understandings about the nature of knowledge that influences teaching and learning, and the way in which that knowledge might be identified, portrayed, applied and shared in developing a pedagogy of teacher education (Loughran, 2006). Episteme is defined as propositional knowledge applicable to a wide array of situations while phronesis is practical knowledge derived through experience and specific situations (Korthagen, et al, 2001). Although phronesis may not be generalizable, it is appropriate to a given situation (Loughran, 2006).

It is crucial to view teacher education as problematic in order to grasp the full extent of the value of the frames of episteme and phronesis (Korthagen et al., 2001). Students of teaching may not be able to use epistemic knowledge in immediate problems of practice. Although the problems pre-service teachers are confronted and the solutions for these problems may be obvious to the teacher educator, the problems and their solutions are not purposefully linked for the pre-service teachers as they do not see the problem in the same way as the teacher educator does. In the same vein, the teacher educator also faces the distinction between episteme and phronesis. The teacher educator develops knowledge of teaching over time, and frames this knowledge in the form of episteme. However, this implicit knowledge must be translated into explicit knowledge in order to answer the problems of learning and teaching about teaching (Loughran, 2006).

Decades ago, Ginsburg (1988), who is concerned about whether pre-service teachers are encouraged to treat curriculum as problematic, criticizes the coursework in most teacher education programs to be too focused on the details of lesson planning which educates pre-service teachers to follow prescribed techniques and ignore the complex nature of subjectivity and interpretation. On the other hand, knowledge as problematic suggests "a tentative view of knowledge as socially constructed, subject to political, economic, social and cultural forces, and contingent upon communities of discourse, relations of power, and social change" (Britzman, 2003, p. 62). Despite the considerable attention theory-practice-gap has received over the decades (Cheng et al. 2010; Knight 2015), complexities and challenges of this gap persists (McGarr et al. 2017; Tilson, 2017). Examining the ways Teachers' Society works and evolves can contribute to the enduring literature on bridging this gap.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher education must involve adequate practical work (Dewey, 1904). According to Dewey (1994), the difficulty of linking theory and practice in teacher education originates from limited time of student-teaching and lack of effective conditions in the school to student-teach. The former necessitates putting student-teaching to its most effective use. However, it is difficult for one to do the actual work of teaching without the adequate time to practice the technical skills learned at the university. Regarding the latter, the best that the teacher education institution can do is to offer an imitation of the real school setting which results in fundamental reduction and elimination of significant features of the school. The ultimate consequence of this is, as Dewey puts it, that "the *best interest of the children* (emphasis in the original) is so safeguarded and supervised that the situation approaches learning to swim without going *too* (emphasis in the original) near the water" (1904, p. 12). Therefore, several experts in the field (e.g., John Dewey (1859-1952); William James (1842-1910)) contributed to the development of

pragmatism, more specifically intelligent practice which refers to extracting theory from practice and then applying it back to practice (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Concerned about reducing the confusing cacophony of experience to something that could be understood, Dewey (1994) emphasized this cyclic reflective movement from deconstruction to reconstruction. As he (1938, p. 25) cautioned almost a century ago: "the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative."

Underlining education as problem solving and teaching as a political activity, Freire (1970) used the term *praxis* in association with the recursive reciprocation between theory and practice. In Freire's dialogic pedagogy, praxis referring to reflection and action, is essential to consider the individual as a historical subject trying to transform the world. The individual is seeking to overcome the culture of silence through a dialogical method of liberation together with others. Dialogue as praxis upon contradictions and complexities in society provides an opportunity for the individual to claim their power as a subject and (re)create the future (Haavelsrud, 2008). In Freire's words, "There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis; to speak a true word is to transform the world" (1970, p.87). Thus, praxis is a fundamental concept in Freire's revolutionary perception of social liberation.

The gap between theory and practice becomes most obvious when student-teachers are supposed to make sense of theory and start employing it theoretically during student-teaching (Britzman, 2003). This is a complex and multidimensional process of transforming what is obtained from university coursework into their teaching practices as well as forgetting about their student perspective and obtaining the viewpoint of a teacher. Considering the intersecting and complicated demands of this process, one does not need to be an expert to see that this transformation is highly problematic.

According to Britzman (2003), the dominant organization of teacher education contributes to this gap. Pre-service teachers come to the university expecting to receive practical methods and techniques applicable to classroom practice. This implicit search for a "bag of teaching tricks" precludes the desire for theory (Helleve, Eide, & Ulvik, 2021, p. 1). "The education coursework that does not immediately address *know how* or how *make do* with the way things are . . . appears impractical, idealistic, and too theoretical." (Britzman, 2003, p.64, emphasis in original). Pre-service teachers' search for practical ideas and teacher education programs' focus on theory move in opposite directions, only widening the gap between theory and practice.

This academic separation of theory from practice can be transformed dialogically by guiding pre-service teachers to question the theory, trying to make sense of theory in diverse contexts through different perspectives of practitioners, and posing questions about theory that relate to the experiences and voices of practitioners. Questioning the links between "the practice and the practitioner, the theory and the theorizer, and the circumstance and the lived experience" makes possible to link theory and practice (in alternate approaches), which will help both to start to flourish in the lived experiences, emotions, beliefs, and values of practitioners in dialogue with the context (Britzman, 2003, p.64). That way, theorizing can occur with its potential to transform ideas and individuals (both learners and teachers), providing a valuable setting for the reflective process in the synthesis of theory from experience (Britzman, 2003). Such a perspective of theorizing offers teachers to be theorizing agents who can harmonize theory and practice in a situated, fluid and flexible way (Clandinin, 1985, 1986; Connelly & Elbaz, 1983). This kind of knowledge is "not an extant body of facts and theories but living, experimental, processual, flexible, creative, compilation of insights, memories, information, associations,

articulations going into resourcing on-the-spot teacher decision-making and action" (Woods, 1987, p. 122).

In recognizing and valuing the development of professional knowledge, Loughran (2006, p. 136) proposes the "student-teacher as researcher." He agrees with Stenhouse (1975), who emphasizes that self-monitoring on the part of teachers enriches teaching by improving it and evaluating curricular proposals. Having a meaningful option to improve professional practice, student-teachers as researchers will have a new and meaningful chance to understand their own needs as well as those of others within the context. Consequently, their own learning about teaching is shaped, and thus they become better informed about their own professional learning (Loughran, 2006). Examining Loughran's (2006) perspective of pre-service teachers as researchers within an alternative program can provide valuable insights.

As the above literature suggests, the link between theory and practice in teacher education can frequently be problematic in traditional programs but alternative teacher education programs can provide effective ways to (re)consider this bridge. Teachers' Society, presented below, is one of few boutique alternative teacher education programs aimed at providing pre-service teachers with an effective setting where they can have an internal need to learn by reflecting on their own and their peers' experiences within a community. By examining the commitments of the program and the resulting processes for pre-service teachers, this study aims to explore an alternate approach to the process of working to bridge the long-standing gap.

Teachers' Society Program

Teachers' Society is an alternative teacher education program which was celebrating its 20th anniversary at the time of this research. Teachers' Society provides pre-service middle and high school teachers (both undergraduate and graduate students) with a setting that is highly personalized and strongly supportive of the community. Fundamentally, Teachers' Society aims to foster a community of practice while pre-service teachers gain responsibilities for classroom teaching and improve themselves toward teaching certification (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002). Part of the program's mission includes having pre-service teachers set their own goals and problem solving in the field. This student self-directed learning is grounded on the premise that pedagogical skills are rooted in an intensive field experience –integral to professional preparation of teachers (Chapman & Flinders, 2006). Three features of the program outline its approach to teacher education: the seminar setting, a culminating portfolio, and the field experience. These key features of Teachers' Society are summarized below and examined in the analysis section in detail.

The seminar is the cornerstone of all work in the program and can be considered the equivalent of coursework in a traditional program. The program included three cohorts of students (two in-class and one online). Eighteen to twenty teacher candidates (undergraduate and graduate) representing all stages of preparation from beginners to candidate teachers and all concentration areas regularly meet once a week under the guidance of one faculty coordinator and an advanced doctoral student who supervises their personalized programs and fieldwork.

Teachers' Society provides pre-service teachers with a setting to achieve a teaching license without accumulating as many credits for professional education requirements as their counterparts in the university's traditional secondary program. Towards this, they prepare a portfolio during their study in the program. By presenting their accumulated evidence in a

project-based professional portfolio, the pre-service teachers of Teachers' Society demonstrate competence by collecting evidence regarding what it means to be qualified teachers. The portfolio includes sixteen expectations based on the Interstate New Teacher Assessment Standards Consortium (INTASC) model. The portfolio is evaluated by faculty to decide whether the students are prepared to teach (Damico et al., 2019).

As the third feature requires, Teachers' Society is heavily field-based. One of the crucial tasks of the students entering the program is to establish an apprenticeship by the end of their second semester. Students choose a mentor teaching in their content area and affiliate with this mentor for a minimum of two semesters prior to student-teaching. The length of this process depends essentially on the needs of individual students but most Teachers' Society students spend four semesters within their field setting. A central function of this experience is the requirement that an apprentice spends at least one day per week with their mentor. The cultivation of this critical partnership becomes the cornerstone of the program over time (Damico et al., 2019).

Method

In this study, qualitative phenomenological design was used to describe the role of Teachers' Society in linking theory and practice from various perspectives. Such a design is effective in examining phenomena in contexts such as a school setting or classroom (Creswell, 2003, 2013; Hoepfl, 1997). This qualitative research design is most appropriate in gaining in-depth information and/or new perspectives about phenomena (Hoepfl, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The researcher first got to know about Teachers' Society during her studies as a Fulbright scholar in the Midwestern United States. While working on other research projects at the same university, the researcher kept hearing about the successful aspects of the program during several formal and informal talks with faculty, alumni, and students of Teachers' Society. Her personal curiosity of the program eventually resulted in a formal research design, the findings of which led to this manuscript. The first set of data included participant observation in the three seminar sessions of the two main cohorts and the online cohort, one program faculty meeting, and one Teachers' Society community meeting; field notes collected throughout the observations throughout a year; and curriculum materials. The observations were conducted in the seminars taught by the faculty members and associate instructors with whom the semi-structured interviews were completed. For all these, permissions and informed consent of the faculty and instructors coordinating and teaching these seminars were obtained beforehand. In the beginning of seminars, the faculty members introduced the researcher and asked the students' approval, as well.

The official website of the program was very useful as it provided information about the program, seminars, apprenticeship, portfolio process, program students, governance, the application process to the program, and portfolio documentation process. Furthermore, curriculum materials (e.g., syllabi, lesson plans) were collected from program instructors. This inquiry was useful in describing, understanding, and clarifying the roles of theory and practice within the program as well as the roles of the program stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty members, instructors, and mentors). At the end of this phase, the questions for the interviews and the electronic surveys were created in light of the related literature. The questions focused on the

main aspects of the program, the main functions of each aspect, the roles of faculty, pre-service teachers, and mentor teachers in the program, the role of theory and practice, commitments/aspects of the program that they appreciated, commitments/aspects of the program that need improvement, and their thoughts/comments on the lack of emphasis on content knowledge and subject-matter pedagogy for students in the field. The electronic survey questions focused on students' ideas regarding the benefits of the program for the students, their possible concerns regarding any aspects of the program, and the role of theory and practice in the program.

All of the data sources were used to answer each of the two research questions. Both the primary and follow-up interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to analysis. Table 1 represents the details of the formal data collection phases in the study.

Data Sets	Procedures of Data Collection	Outcomes
1	• **Participant observation in the three seminar sessions of the two main cohorts and the online cohort, one program faculty meeting, and one Teachers' Society community meeting; field notes collected throughout the observations throughout a year; and curriculum materials.**	• **Information towards the research questions** • **Semi-structured interview questions** • **Electronic survey questions** • **Triangulation of data**
2	• **Semi-structured interviews with faculty and instructors** • **Electronic surveys with students**	• **Primary data towards the research questions** • **Triangulation of data**
3	• **Follow-up interviews with program faculty and students**	• **Member checking** • **Triangulation of data**

Table 1: Phases and Procedures of the Data Collection

The second and primary data set included semi-structured interviews with program faculty and associate instructors and electronic surveys with program students. The interviews were completed with four faculty members and three associate instructors, whose experiences in the Teachers' Society program ranged from four to twenty years. They were chosen among others because of their longer period of service in the program. They were contacted via e-mail in order to learn whether they would volunteer. The approximately one-hour interviews were conducted in the participants' office rooms and/or at tables designated for students and faculty in the building depending on the preferences of the participants. Table 2 represents the faculty and associate instructors who participated in the study.

Faculty and Associate Instructors	Position/Experience in the Program
Professor Finnigen	Professor/ 15 years
Dr. Gavin	Assist. Professor/ 5 years
Dr. Hammond	Professor/ 20 years
Dr. Day	Professor/ 10 years
David	Advanced PhD student/ 6 years
Taylor	Advanced PhD Student/ 4 years
Lara	Advanced PhD Student/ 4 years

Table 2: The Faculty and Associate Instructors Who Participated in the Study

As Polkinghorne (2005) outlines, comparing and contrasting perspectives help uncover essential characteristics across the sources. In essence, this phase of inquiry helped scrutinize core meanings through multiple accounts of students' lived experiences, and provided deeper understanding of the program (Polkinghorne, 2005). The utilization of open-ended interview questions provided interpretive, naturalistic approach that described the phenomenon of participant experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Seidman, 2006).

Yet, an additional phase of inquiry was required to include the voices and perspectives of the program students to achieve in-depth data. Pre-service teachers registered in the program were emailed open ended survey questions aiming to gain insights regarding their reasons to join the program, to what extent the program has served their goals, what aspects of the program they valued, and what aspects needed improvements. Seven teacher candidates (three undergraduate and four graduate) responded this survey. Table 2 represents the pre-service teachers who answered the survey.

Pre-service Teachers	Degree	Ethnicity &Gender	Department
Marry	Undergraduate Freshmen	Caucasian Female	Special Education
Lisa	Graduate Student	Caucasian Female	English
Michael	Graduate Student	African-American Male	Math
Kathy	Undergraduate Junior	Asian-American Female	English
Mike	Undergraduate Senior	Caucasian Male	Science
Alex	Graduate	Caucasian Female	Science
Dave	Graduate	Latino	Science

Table 3: The Pre-service Teachers Who Participated in the Study by Answering the Survey

Analysis and Warrant

All three sets of data were recorded and verbatim transcribed. Each transcript was uploaded to the MAXQDA Plus 2020. The first set of data (notes from participant observation in the three seminar sessions of the two main cohorts and the online cohort, one program faculty meeting, and one Teachers' Society community meeting; field notes collected throughout the observations throughout a year; and curriculum materials) was first analyzed through document analysis to create the questions for the semi-structured interviews and electronic surveys (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2009). Next, the first and second sets of data (field notes, observation notes, curriculum materials, semi-structured interviews with faculty and associate instructors and electronic surveys with program students) were then categorized based on the information provided by the participants to analyze the data. Reconstructive and thematic analysis procedures were used to examine the data. Data analysis was employed by sketch-coding the data, focusing on how participants constructed their experiences and ideas of the program based on their educational experiences and interactions with others and the aspects of the program as recommended in reconstructive data analysis (Carspecken, 1996). Following that, codes were reconsidered to meaningfully thematize them utilizing the main premises of the conceptual framework. The focus was on when and how participants referred to various forms of experiences and interactions within various aspects of the program, associated with their learning process of linking theory to practice. Finally, four themes to address the two research questions were created: self-directed learning, community-oriented educational design, apprenticeship, and portfolio.

Triangulation and member checking were employed to increase the credibility and warrant for the findings. To employ triangulation, data sources were examined to see how interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and documents confirmed or contradicted different data sources. During follow-up interviews with participants (the third data set), member-checking technique was employed to gauge the accuracy of participant responses (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The faculty members and associate instructors completing the interviews and the students completing the electronic surveys were contacted to comment specifically on the accuracy of the data and the analytic categories.

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations which should be noted. The findings of the study are based on a relatively small sample. Moreover, due to the convenience sample of voluntary participants, the subjects may not be representative. Still, the credibility of triangulation, member-checking and comparison with other research results have been considered. Furthermore, possible problems of reflexivity in interpretations and analysis have been addressed by describing the research process and including data excerpts to show transparency. Finally, recognizing possible lack of validity or credibility of the participants' accounts due to several possible reasons (e.g., social desirability), the researcher relied on various sources of data besides the participant interviews.

Findings

Examining the multiple sources of data in order to answer the two research questions (what are the commitments of the Teachers' Society program to bridge theory and practice in teacher education? and what main processes do pre-service teachers engage in the Teachers' Society towards bridging theory and practice?), this section presents the findings below titled as:
1) self-directed learning: diversity and inclusion, 2) community-oriented educational design: practicing democracy, 3) apprenticeship: where theory meets practice, and 4) portfolio: improvement and skill mastery through personal history of pre-service teachers.

Self-Directed Learning: Diversity and Inclusion

One of the major themes emerging from the data referred to the self-directed learning environment that the program provided for the students. An inside joke that a few participants referred to boasted regarding the extensive control pre-service teachers can have over their experience: "So what, then, is the most damnable feature of the program? Why, that it gives teacher candidates so much control over their preparation as teachers, of course." This feature of the program was established and maintained for students with diverse backgrounds and goals. Unlike traditional teacher education programs, Teachers' Society's highly personalized design attracted teacher candidates in widely different circumstances: (1) sophomore, junior, or senior teacher candidates working toward bachelor's degrees; (2) graduates with baccalaureate degrees seeking to become middle or high school teachers; (3) mid-career changers who had at least baccalaureate degrees and had worked in one or more careers; and (4) current full-time middle and high school teachers without licenses (they might use their ongoing teaching of at least three years as their apprenticeship).

However, despite the inclusive nature of the program, Teachers' Society was not suitable for everyone. As Dr. Finnigen suggested, "There is a huge expectation of self-directed learning. If the student is not able to go out and visit classrooms and take the initiative to find his or her mentor, (s)he is not a good fit for the program." Hard work and self-motivation were essential for possible candidates.

In addition to the participating faculty members, all of the seven teacher candidates participating in the study also appreciated the self-directed learning nature of the program. To illustrate, Mike (a Caucasian undergraduate science senior) confirmed:

> I joined Teachers' Society because it felt like a good fit for me. I am not a typical college student so I felt like a non-typical program would work. I also appreciate the freedom to pursue things my way and hold my own accountability for my teacher preparation.

Teachers' Society included students from various disciplines: health, special education, journalism, science, language arts/English, social studies, visual arts, mathematics, and world languages. Pre-service teachers were put in the field early and linked with their mentor teacher in the field so that they could construct their understanding of what teaching is by trying it out. Moreover, after beginning professional preparation, students were enrolled in the seminar for four credit hours every term that they were on campus. They completed the program when they satisfied the sixteen program expectations, passed the methods and reading courses (content), and satisfactorily completed student-teaching. The time students took to complete the requirements of the program varied widely based on their backgrounds and qualifications.

Entering students who had an extensive background or teaching experience might take over one year to complete it while others might need three semesters or more. This flexibility contributed to the self-directed approach of the program, which resulted in unique processes for the pre-service teachers around their needs and goals.

As with any program, some students did not succeed. In such a highly individualized program, about ten per cent of the students did not succeed due to a variety of reasons. The main reason related to how well the student fit the program. Teachers' Society relied on students who took initiative to find their own mentor, managed their time well, and participated productively in a community. While it was individualized in some senses, the program also called on students to be part of a team (e.g., practice teaching in pairs; co-teaching with a mentor; organizing community-wide events, and recruiting new students). As a result, some students opted out of Teachers' Society because this approach was not for them. However, as Dr. Gavin emphasized, it was not like "falling through the cracks." Students were held accountable for their progress (e.g., passing each semester with at least 85%, attending a weekly field experience, and maintaining consistent work on their portfolio, which was tied to achieving the 85%); they could not really drift far from these requirements and still succeed. For example, Dr. Gavin required her group to keep a weekly journal and turn it in to her so she could see how their field experience and their thinking about teaching were developing. With twice weekly check-ins (in the seminar and by journals), it was rare for someone to fall through the cracks unnoticed. That way, the faculty could know about the problems students were having and work to resolve them effectively. This also related to making sure that a student not only wanted to join the program but was also a good fit given the truly student-centered nature of the program. This commitment of the program provided a safe setting for pre-service teachers to engage in their processes of theorizing.

Community-oriented Educational Design: Practicing Democracy

Teachers' Society provided a unique support system and added perspective on secondary education within a community-based setting in which pre-service teachers supported each other in their processes of making sense of the theory. As members of this community, pre-service teachers developed strong relationships with their fellow student teachers in ongoing seminars and worked directly with a mentor teacher in real-world classrooms one to two days a week.

Acceptance by the university was not acceptance into the program. Teachers' Society had a comprehensive application and recruitment process: completing the application form, doing a half-hour interview with Teachers' Society students and faculty, and visiting the seminar cohorts and stating a preference for one cohort. Recruitment committee that consisted of present members had a set of criteria considering candidates as individuals who would expand the groups' cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity, improve its gender balance, expand the age ranges, and broaden its subject matter specialties and worldviews of their members. Dr. Finnigen reported:

> *It is a give and take. Some of my students have particular beliefs that I do not*
> *agree with but that is ok. They share their beliefs. I share my beliefs. We have a*
> *wide range of people: Christian fundamentalist, Jewish, everything in terms of*
> *wide wide range of political beliefs and religious beliefs. The atmosphere or the*
> *climate of the seminar is open. Sometimes we have a party at the end of the*

semester. I ask students to describe themselves in 3 words at the party. The differences in the words are really funny. Some people describe themselves as ultra conservative; the next person says "oh I am ultra-liberal." They bring a wide range of beliefs into the program. We encourage people to be open to change. We cannot change people without openness to the possibility you might change. We talk a lot about dialogue.

Being part of an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution, the program offered special assistance for students with a disability who may need assistance through special arrangements by the Disabled Student Services. This commitment of the program provided an inclusive approach and setting where pre-service teachers could engage in their processes of linking theory and practice with the support of their peers, instructors and mentors.

Teachers' Society aimed to help develop pre-service teachers enter the profession with substantial experience and realization of the value of individual empowerment, diversity, community, democracy, flexibility, and real-life learning. The program attempted to practice what it preached through its democratic governance process. Any community member could propose a change in Teachers' Society's rules of operation. These proposals were considered according to the procedures developed by the members, and then they were voted during monthly Teachers' Society community meetings. Every community member (i.e., program students, faculty, and associate instructors) had a vote in determining how the program would evolve to meet new expectations and challenges. At least the vote of sixty percent of the community was required for the approval of a proposed change. At its core, the program offered a challenging but at the same time empowering process for the teachers of the future. Such a process required significant commitment. Consequently, every new member of the community was required to comply with "Words to live by," which is a document functioning as the program's covenant. This document was periodically reconsidered by the entire community. Before any changes were performed in its content, it was crucial to reach a consensus among the community members. Again, this collaborative commitment of the program helped provide an inclusive approach and setting for pre-service teachers to engage in their processes of linking theory and practice in pluralistic ways.

Being the cornerstone of all work in the program, the weekly seminars replaced most of the standard teacher education coursework except for the content methods course(s) and a reading methods course required by state law. The group's members were at different stages in the program, and each member enrolled in the seminars for at least two semesters. Thus, each group could be named as a rolling cohort. These 18 to 20 teacher candidates, one faculty coordinator, and an advanced doctoral student met once a week to have their discussion about themes chosen by students. As Dr. Taylor suggested, the program was based on the idea that

Students will learn best when they have significant stake in the selection and delivery so to speak of the seminar curriculum so that they will be able to identify what the most pressing concerns, questions, and issues are for them when they are out in the field.

That way, the pre-service teachers were given chances to think about the ways that could be shaped into a coherent curriculum for their weekly seminar. In the seminar, the pre-service teachers explored educational theories, practices, and effective instructional strategies while they assumed several responsibilities such as setting the agenda, leading sessions, and solving problems by consensus.

All participants of the study emphasized that the seminar was one of the key concepts in terms of the design of the Teachers' Society, making it different from other teacher education programs. Dr. Hammond stated that,

> The seminars are not very structured. They can talk about their observations if they want to talk about it. In the beginning of the seminar, we have a process we call 'connections', during which students talk about anything they need to talk. Often it relates to their field placement. They do bring up concerns, thoughts, success stories whatever. Sometimes they bring up personal issues, too. So, that is connections. We also have something called "Crises du jour" meaning the crisis of the day. That is when the students can share their observations in the field. For example, "this kid was out of control." They say what they really wanna say. They ask 'What do you think?' So that is kind of a checking with them.

Teachers' Society students often set up life-long relationships with their faculty coordinators, their colleagues in their seminar groups, and their mentor teachers in the field thanks to their close association over time. This provided a friendly atmosphere for them so that they could talk about their concerns with others without hesitation. This humanistic approach of the program relates to its commitment to support pre-service teachers in their processes of praxis within a democratic setting.

All of the seven teacher candidates valued the seminar a lot. For example, Lisa, a Caucasian female graduate student majoring in English, reported that "[the seminar] fits [her] needs really well so far. [She] [was] getting a huge kick out seminar. It's a safe space to discuss teaching and work with future colleagues." Another example, Michael, an African-American male graduate student majoring in Math, claimed "The seminar has broadened [his] horizons in the world of education, and [he] continue[s] to learn much from it as well. [He] also feel[s] a common bond with [his] seminar mates as [they] prepare to be teachers together." This student-centered and collaborative approach of the program referred to its commitment to support preservice teachers in their unique processes within a community of support.

The lack of emphasis on content knowledge and subject-matter pedagogy did not seem to present problems for pre-service teachers in the field. In the seminars observed during data collection, they were sometimes referring to their content knowledge and bringing ideas from their subject-specific courses into seminar. They would often work in seminar in content area groups so that they could work collaboratively with others on a pedagogy issue specific to their chosen subject. They would frequently end up learning more about different content areas than their own because the groups would then share out what they had designed and how it related to their content area. All faculty members and the associate instructors agreed that having a well-rounded education like this only benefited the students in the field. In addition, they had their one-day-a-week immersion in their mentor's classroom so they gained a real content-based experience as part of their Teachers' Society program every week for the duration of their time in Teachers' Society. This referred to the program's commitment to support pre-service teachers in their meaning-making and theorizing in their personal and professional processes.

Apprenticeship: Where Theory Meets Practice

Teachers' Society valued that pre-service teachers must gain experience in field placement by getting acclimated to the school culture and getting to know the students and the teachers as soon as possible. Dr. Gavin affirmed that unlike students in a traditional teacher education program, Teachers' Society provided students with opportunities to gain effective field practicum over time. However, finding a mentor and negotiating over several things could be frustrating and scary for teacher candidates. Dr. Gavin illustrated this challenging but at the same time empowering process with a metaphor by suggesting,

> *Of course, we push that. Like a mother bird kicking the kid out of the nest. Go on explore this place. It is good for you. We are here for support. You come running back and complain about it. Or still have trouble finding a mentor and we will provide a list of potential mentors that you can go find. But YOU have to go do it.*

Teachers' Society helped program students establish these field assignments where they could become valued additions to their schools through continuous service. During their long-term relationship with their mentors, students fundamentally agreed to serve as volunteers, part-time assistants whose autonomy and responsibilities increased as their mentors trusted in their abilities. Therefore, establishing a relationship with the mentor was considered a critical process in Teachers' Society. In order for this relationship to be established on a sound basis, the pre-service teacher, the mentor and the faculty had a three-way meeting during which each of them talked about their expectations. Regarding the nature of this meeting, Dr. Hammond reported,

> *If the student does not talk about his or her expectations, I ask them 'what would you like from the mentor teacher?' and they tell their expectations from their mentors. If they do not tell whether they want their mentors to criticize them, I prompt them 'do you want your mentor teacher to criticize you?' and 'How do you want that to look like?' and they answer.*

Similarly, she encouraged the mentor to tell their expectations from the student teacher. Lastly, Dr. Hammond explained her own expectations from the student teacher and the mentor. After the three-way meeting, this critical relationship was finally established with an alert sent to the principal, the mentor and the student informing them that this relationship was established and the student was going to visit the school once a week.

The apprenticeship was a mutual process from which both teacher candidates and the mentors benefit. Such mutual respect engendered commitment. Teachers' Society's mentor teachers were critical stakeholders of the program, and they were always welcomed members of the seminars. According to Dr. Day and the two associate instructors in the study, the mentors also enjoyed this long-term relationship. Lara, one of the associate instructors, explained,

> *If they are a mentor in Teachers' Society, they usually really really like it. I think the reason they really really like it is because it gives them an opportunity to sort of be recognized for their teaching which does not happen very often these days. That seems to be a real validation for them.*

As John, another associate instructor, added, the mentors wanted the student teachers to be active rather than just sit in the back of the classroom. They wanted the student teachers to tell them when they want things. It is essential to note that the mentors occasionally said that the student teachers brought a lot of enthusiasm, which they valued highly. The mentor teachers mostly talked about how much they enjoyed having the student teachers because they would come to their class regularly and the mentors would feel "validated" and the student teachers

"chose them" instead of the School of Education placing them. "In fact, the student teachers went out and looked around and told them 'I want you.' That makes them happy," Dr. Day explained. This commitment of the program not only validated the practitioners' experiences but also supported pre-service teachers to tailor their processes of meaning-making around their unique needs and expectations.

Portfolio: Improvement and Skill Mastery through Personal History of Student Teachers

In line with the requirements developed by State Professional Standards Board, Teachers' Society provided teaching licensure based on the successful completion of sixteen performance-based expectations organized into a comprehensive portfolio as evidence. Beyond serving towards the accountability of the program, Teachers' Society's portfolio mapped student teachers' growth as professional educators, and it often included artifacts such as written documents, video and audio recordings, photographs, and actual works of art. Therefore, Dr. Finnigen stated that he told his students "Your portfolio will look different from anyone else's." The challenge for the teacher candidates, as he put, "is to keep them engaged and putting themselves in the portfolio." As such, the portfolio constantly evolved to reflect the teacher candidate's habits of mind, character, values, and commitment. Students valued the portfolio as they viewed it as a growing body of work that is illustrative of what they have done so far. One of the students claimed "[the portfolio] is the greatest accomplishment of [her] life." Another student in the program argued that "the portfolio has been most helpful. It allows [his] learning to be personalized and self-directed."

Both the faculty members and the associate instructors emphasized the vitality of portfolio in the program because pre-service teachers went out and observed classes early on, which provided them with opportunities for an ongoing reflection and analysis of the school context. The true way of evaluating the pre-service teachers' reflection and evaluation of their field experience was achieved effectively through the seminars and their portfolio work. Portfolio meant more than evaluation or assessment, and was tied to Teachers' Society's definition of what it meant to be a capable teacher. As the pre-service teachers built evidence, they reflected on who they were and who they wanted to be, they could not help but grow. Portfolios catalogued pre-service teachers' goals, accomplishments, and failures; reflected student-teachers' perceptions of personal abilities and intellectual processes such as continuous transformation and self-evaluation. Their portfolios were constant reflections of their identities, values, and development toward becoming professional educators. Some program alumni even continued to keep and revise their portfolios after graduation.

All the commitments of the program came together to create a dynamic, dialectical (Freire, 1970) setting for pre-service teachers to self-confidently experiment with theory within the support of their peers, mentors, and professors as they progressed in their own processes of becoming teachers. These are discussed in more detail below.

Discussion

The analyses of the data revealed that Teachers' Society is a unique program in creating intelligent practice for teacher candidates so that they can extract theory from their own experiences. The way Teachers' Society was designed and run, as well as the way the program

stakeholders (inter)acted, provided an effective setting where learning occurred collaboratively while pre-service teachers and other stakeholders experienced democratic ways of being and doing in the community. These themes are discussed below.

A Dialectical Design: An Interplay of Fundamentals

The participants of the study underlined that Teachers' Society is a unique program that has evolved through time around the needs and expectations of the pre-service teachers. The program stands on three vital fundamentals: the seminar, the apprenticeship, and the portfolio. These fundamentals interconnect to form a distinct context and a fluid structure for pre-service teachers working towards their future profession. The seminar, the cornerstone of all work in the program and somewhat the equivalent of coursework in a traditional program, brought together pre-service teachers from different stages in the program to explore together educational theories, practices, and effective instructional strategies in light of pressing concerns, questions, and issues from their field experiences. Under the guidance of a faculty coordinator and an advanced doctoral student, heterogeneous groups of pre-service teachers (re)constructed "theories of practice" or "theories in practice" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 48) through active action (e.g., setting the agenda, leading sessions, and solving problems by consensus) during the seminar. This is in line with what teacher education scholars have proposed for decades (Britzman, 2003; Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flories, 1991; Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986; Schön, 1983).

The apprenticeship, the second unique feature of the program, is that pre-service teachers were the ones who chose their mentors instead of having the School of Education assign one for them. This meant that they were supposed to look for a mentor teacher in their subject area whom they respected enough to want to apprentice themselves to throughout their preparation to become a teacher. Established on a sound basis through a three-way meeting, this long-term relationship provided an authentic context where pre-service teachers could take active roles such as volunteers and part-time assistants during their early intensive fieldwork, which nourished their autonomy (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lampert, 2010) within an authentic setting (Caprano et al., 2010) in collaboration with a mentor (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). The pre-service teachers in the Teachers' Society highly appreciated the opportunity to work alongside a master, a time-honored way to learn (Day, 1999; Flores, 2006; Izadinia, 2016; Zeichner, 1995). Although the modeling in apprenticeships is considered a powerful intervention for decades (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 1995; 2010), the concept often breaks down when an apprentice is arbitrarily assigned to a mentor, resulting in possible tensions, struggles, and conflicts (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Hobson et al., 2009; Jasper et al., 2014; Manderstedt, et al., 2022; Rhoads et al., 2013; Ruich, et al., 2020). Teachers' Society mitigated this problem by empowering the pre-service teachers to select their own mentors and then change their mentors if the need occurred. This meant, besides a good-match, a considerable deal of initiative, a sense of ownership, and control over the process for the pre-service teachers. This helped achieve an ongoing interplay between theory and practice on a weekly basis between seminar and the field experience.

The third key concept in Teachers' Society was portfolio which contributed to the program's alternate approach to teacher education. The program students accumulated evidence demonstrating their capability to teach effectively through developing a portfolio based on authentic performance. Beyond a tool towards accountability, portfolios reflected pre-service

teachers' intellectual and personal processes, providing opportunities for self-evaluation and constant transformation during their studies in the program and when they started teaching. This is in line with the findings of numerous studies emphasizing benefits of portfolios to promote reflection, autonomy, and personal and professional development (Darling Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Newby 2012; Wray, 2007; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). Another contribution of the program to the literature lies in the fact that it encourages pre-service teachers to set purposes of their portfolio early on under the guidance of their mentors, which is the most important aspect of the process especially in determining its role as a tool for self-reflection (Barab, et al., 2009; Barton & Collins, 1993; Chapman & Flinders, 2006) and authentic assessment (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Iverson, et al., 2008). This finding calls for further research in order to scrutinize the complexities of using portfolios not only as an accountability tool but also a support for personal and professional reflection and authentic assessment.

The analyses demonstrated that all these three fundamentals of the program dialectally inform each other and create a dynamic setting in which the program evolves around the needs of the students (Freire, 1970). The dynamic interplay of these fundamentals creates a context which allows pre-service teachers to consider problems and processes extracted from their active engagement in the intensive fieldwork with their mentors within a community of peers, or reciprocally their interactions with other peers in the seminar to inform their fieldwork. Similarly, the reflective process of developing portfolios created content for the seminar and fieldwork while it provided a setting to engage in reflection and action. This dynamic structure of the program lends itself well to create this interplay where the line between content of and context for learning blurs, reciprocally influencing each other, and eventually linking theory and practice. The related literature (e.g., Barab, et al., 2009; Chapman & Flinders, 2006; Ruich, et al., 2020) accounts similar findings and calls for further examination of the reciprocal interactions within similar teacher education programs.

Roles within a Teacher Education Program as a Center for Collaborative Learning

The dynamic, dialectical design of the program discussed above was created and maintained by the wholistic and powerful roles of the stakeholders. The data in this study provided numerous examples of the extended diverse roles of each community member. Teachers' Society constituted a community allowing for personalized learning in collaboration with others. Most significantly, the pre-service teachers were active community members of the program where they took active roles in all aspects of the program such as the seminar, the school classroom, the monthly community meetings, and the recruitment committee. Besides the portfolio that was created around the needs and expectations of the pre-service teachers, their voice was visible and impactful in every aspect of the program as they were the co-architects of the program in general as well as the designers and decision-makers within the program. Such a process made personalized learning within a community possible.

The apprenticeship is another example of learning in collaboration as it was a mutual process from which both pre-service teachers and the mentors benefitted. Pre-service teachers engaged in authentic practice under their mentor's supervision but this also provided validation for practicing teachers for their work and opportunity for professional reflection and development. As critical stakeholders of the program, mentors frequently attended the seminar where they could grow in collaboration with others. With such a commitment, Teachers' Society differs from traditional approaches to mentorship where the focus is the professional

development of pre-service teachers with the guidance of mentors only (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Wang & Odell, 2007; Wildman et al., 1992). Extending the roles of the mentors to the seminar provided a voice for them within the program and including mentors in the three-way meeting to establish the apprenticeship, making their needs and expectations visible, possibly reducing the possibility of tensions and conflicts between pre-service teachers and mentors (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Ruich, et al., 2020). With this commitment that leans towards deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), Teachers' Society mentors gain their voice and respect, often underestimated within the field of teacher education (Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015).

Yet another example related to the roles of the faculty members and associate instructors who were not the main resource for the pre-service teachers but facilitators and guides among many other resources such as the mentors, peers and faculty from other seminars. Concerns, beliefs and questions of the students were handled in an inclusive, friendly atmosphere of the long-term relationships of the pre-service teachers, peers, mentors, and the faculty members within a collaborative learning setting. With such commitments, Teachers' Society can be considered an example of joint-work among universities, schools, and community towards democratizing teacher education (Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015). Thanks to the commitments of the program discussed, pre-service teachers could engage in personal and professional processes with multiple dimensions where they could tailor their own journey of linking theory and practice within a community.

Conclusions and Implications

Teachers' Society combined people from diverse profiles and backgrounds who learned and grew as individuals within the supportive and dialectical design of a democratic community of pre-service teachers. The program's particular commitments in creating this community of teachers provided effective scaffolding for pre-service teachers they engage in various processes while linking theory and practice as members of a community. Thanks to the fluid design of the program, each member of the community had a vote in determining the evolution of the program as new challenges occurred. Participants of the study strongly believed that in order to accomplish the schools to which we aspire effectively, it is essential to empower pre-service teachers with competences to effectively participate in cultures of democracy. With these commitments, the program leans towards the praxis notion of Freire (1970) that occurs through critical dialogue. Teachers' Society most significantly provides a setting for pre-service teachers to be the architects of their own learning in harmony with others. In Freire's approach they are the Subjects (re)creating their reality in dialogue with others. It provides pre-service teachers with a unique context to explore and extract theories based on collaborative practices within a democratic setting. Thanks to its commitments discussed above, Teachers' Society connects well with Dewey's (1904; 1908) intelligent practice, Britzman's (2003, p. 64) "renovation of theory as social practice," and Loughran's (2006) and Korthagen et al.'s (2001) episteme and phronesis.

As a center for collaborative learning where individuals establish various relationships with others and realize the value of community, diversity, individual and community empowerment, democracy, flexibility, and learning, Teachers' Society leans towards John Dewey's ideas in student-oriented education and social learning (Dewey, 1938; Flinders & Thornton, 2013). As the co-architects of the program, the students of Teachers' Society can

construct their own theories based on the experiences of themselves and their colleagues. When they are actively engaged with the process, they can get the most out of the experience. Such a setting also empowers the pre-service teachers as well as other stakeholders within the program to be the *Subjects* of their learning process (Freire, 1970). The dialectical interplay of above-mentioned dynamics also lends itself well to experience dialogue as "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" established on love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking (Freire, 1970, p. 88).

Due to the relatively recent debates on teacher education programs (e.g., Hess, 2009), scholars in the field share concern regarding the university's role in preparing teachers, and call for a paradigm shift in terms of how we conceptualize teacher education (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2014; Zeichner, 2010; 2015). Rethinking the qualities of teachers and recasting how universities can cross structural restrictions to collaborate with schools and the community more effectively, scholars in the field can reestablish teacher education grounded on democratic professionalism (Sachs, 2003). The alternative design of Teachers' Society provides insights towards empowering pre-service teachers and mentors within collaborative and democratic settings. Although far from providing a complete portray of numerous dynamics and complexities of the program, this study offers insights regarding rethinking the way we design teacher education programs if we are to change the way teachers teach. Future research might effectively explore the relative merits and demerits of similar teacher education programs.

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