No Substitute for Experience: Transforming Teacher Preparation with Experiential and Adult Learning Practices

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Traditional teacher preparation programs and alternative certification programs are under constant scrutiny and strain to prepare students to be more effective in the public classroom and remain in the profession. The Professional Development School is a contemporary, innovative model that shows promise for retaining novice teachers, particularly those working in challenging environments. The unique design results in a transformative learning experience for stakeholders. In particular, learning for the teaching intern is enriched and strengthened by application of experiential and adult learning theory. This approach has the potential of producing more reflective, self-directed learners/teachers with enhanced meta-cognitive skills.

Introduction

Over the centuries, philosophers and educators from Aristotle to John Dewey have acknowledged the close connection between experience and learning, even theorizing how and when experience induces learning. As an early Progressive educator, John Dewey contended that experience could be a moving, cyclical, and transforming force if one reconstructed the experience mentally and could make meaning of it (Boydston, 1991). The Progressive, Humanist and Radical philosophical traditions underscore this position by emphasizing the importance of developing the learner's ability to reflect critically on the experience to build new learning (Elias & Merriam, 2004). Dewey's philosophy intrigued an early adult educator, Lindeman (1926), and the duo laid the theoretical groundwork for the concept of experiential learning as a transformative agent, for both children and adults. Decades would pass before Lindeman's protégé, Knowles (1970), would incorporate that concept in his classic adult learning theory, Andragogy. Andragogy is founded on six assumptions about adult learners, one of which espouses that adults possess a vast and varied storehouse of experiences, a tremendous resource for learning if acknowledged and capitalized on by the educator.

Strangely, despite the rich educational heritage of the concept, universities have been slow to incorporate extensive experiential learning methods for undergraduates and reticent to take advantage of the "rich resource" of practicing experts outside academia, even in teacher preparation programs. While the "teaching" residency period, or internship on a local campus, is a significant culminating experience for the in-service teacher, could it be enriched by application of adult and experiential learning theory and practice, since these are adult learners? The purpose of this article is to describe an innovative teacher preparation model grounded in experiential and transformational adult learning theory -- the Professional Development School (PDS). Patterned after

the medical model used in teaching hospitals, the school's curriculum is based on state licensure standards; exemplary practices are taught and modeled by master teachers; and, student teachers are actively engaged in reflecting and analyzing their classroom behaviors, all within an authentic, constructivist context. The result is a transforming learning experience for all stakeholders. The PDS design is explained first, followed by a brief review of related literature and a discussion of the outcomes of one PDS site, with conclusions and implications we can draw.

Description of the Unique PDS Design

The traditional university model for preparing teachers is comprised of coursework, typically completed in the junior year, followed by the "field experience" in the classroom for approximately 12 to 15 weeks. The student observes in the classroom and then "teaches," under the guidance and mentoring of the "regular" classroom teacher. At the end of the senior year, the pre-service teacher assumes the major teaching responsibilities of a class for a few weeks. The PDS model is a radical departure in philosophy and design. A PDS is conceived by a formal partnership between a school district and university; both entities agree to supply the context, resources and expertise for the venture (Teitel, 2003). A faculty member selected by the university serves as the liaison between the school district and university, overseeing the program, co-supervising interns, and teaching courses at the PDS site. Office space on the PDS campus and some reassignment time is generally granted for these duties. This liaison facilitates between university staff and PDS master teachers to formulate a standards-based curriculum, and is a member of a teaching team with selected master teachers at the site. For the example site described in this article, university faculty submitted documentation of state competencies and objectives to be addressed in senior block courses. The liaison and Master Teachers (MT) then matched authentic classroom learning assignments with state standards and objectives; student interns implemented assignments and then completed reflective exercises on them.

Prospective interns apply for the program at the end of the sophomore year and are selected by the partnership committee. During the senior year (30 weeks), selected interns have two concurrent roles: university student and professional employee for the school district. While taking nine semester credit hours per term, they become a member of a teaching team at a local campus under the supervision and instruction of a grade-level master teacher. In contrast to the traditional student-teacher residency, the teaching intern (TI) is fully integrated into teaching practices for a full academic year, planning and making class decisions from the first day of in-service in August until the last work day in June. The intern receives an annual salary approximately equivalent to a highly qualified paraprofessional and essentially the same employment benefits as the MT (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

The PDS Liaison and grade level master teachers work together to provide a rigorous authentic learning experience for the TIs. MTs are considered university adjunct faculty members and teach university-level courses that support the teacher intern experience; each MT also conducts a professional development seminar for PDS participants. The MT maintains his/her grade level appointment and receives a stipend above the standard regular pay. Each grade level from Kindergarten through fourth is assigned a three-person teaching team, comprised of two interns and one master teacher. The MT serves as faculty of record for 6 hours of special education content and the PDS Liaison is the faculty of record for the remaining coursework. These two members plan scope, sequence, and delivery of all course content and imbed content into the classroom for TI practice. Syllabi and assignment sheets identify standards to assist students in associating content of seminars and classrooms with each of the standards.

Related Literature

This literature review highlights the quandary of teacher attrition and the relevance of experiential and transformative learning theory to the PDS model.

Ingersoll's (2003) study is just one of many alarming reports on the critical issues of teacher attrition and retention. Often cited, the study purports that approximately one-third of all novice teachers will leave the classroom within a three year span, and one-half will probably drop from the profession during the first five years. Schools with high percentages of poverty are reported to be even more vulnerable, experiencing 50% teacher attrition (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007). Turnover or attrition among novice teachers is also an indirect concern for teacher preparation programs. In 2004-05, turnover for public school teachers under the age of 30 was 44% higher than the average teacher turnover rate (Coggshall, Ott, Behrstatt, & Lasagna, 2010). Certainly, the problem has a complex web of causes (McCreight, 2000; Ingersoll, 2003a; Ingersoll, 2003b; Boe, Cook & Sunderland, 2007). Reasons often cited include inadequate preparation for the new teacher during transition into his or her career, lack of support in the early years, poor salaries and working conditions (Darling-Hammond & Bartz-Snowden, 2005). During the first year, in particular, novice teachers struggle with feelings of incompetence as they "assess the fit of the qualifications and interests to the demands of classroom teaching" (Darling-Hammond, 2005, & Bartz-Snowden 2005, p. 25).

Proponents of the PDS model assert that its graduates are "better prepared for the difficult first years of teaching than those pre-service teachers who experience a traditional campus-based program" (Mantle-Bromley, Gould, McWhorter, & Whaley, 2000, p. 2). Darling-Hammond (2005) has been instrumental in developing certification standards for beginning teachers, particularly when working with diverse learners. The author contends that a traditional program (completing all coursework upfront followed by a few weeks of student teaching) is not sufficient. In an undated publication funded by the Gates Foundation on restructuring high schools, Darling-Hammond cited the PDS as ". . . schools that model best practices and are structured to . . . provide needed coaching and collaboration" (2005, p. 6). Interestingly, feedback and collaboration are two of the needs desired by Generation Y teachers (those born between 1977 and 1995), a population which comprises 18% of the current teaching force and is increasing rapidly (Coggshall, Ott, Behrstock, & Lasagna, 2010).

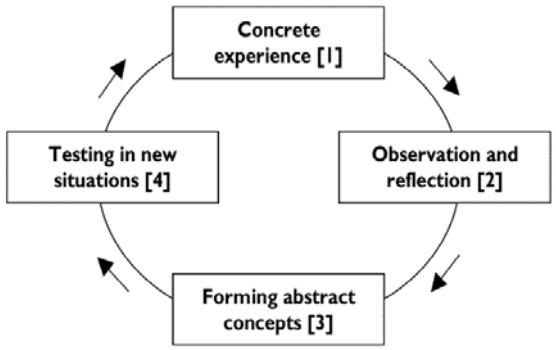
The literature on educational policy and accreditation favors a new paradigm for teacher development. The Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington reports that clinical experiences integrated with content are more effective than just subject-matter (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrin-Mundy, 2001).The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) states in Standard I: Learning Community—Developmental Guidelines:

> PDS partners share a common vision of teaching and learning grounded in the researchcontext of practice. Learning supported by this community results in changes and improvement of individual practice in the policies and practices of the partnering institutions. (2001, p. 11)

Adult and experiential learning theorists would heartily concur with the aforementioned position, but would add that reflecting and assessing the outcomes of experiences is essential to learning. These processes are the transforming characteristics of the PDS. Building on the work of John Dewey and others, adult educator Brookfield (1983) explains experiential learning to be that which involves a direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or merely consider-

ing the prospect of action. Experiential learning theorist Kolb (1984) asserts that simply acquiring or transmitting content does not transform an individual; rather, transformation occurs as he or she interfaces with the content within an experience and later reflects on concepts learned. Kolb's learning cycle, shown in Figure 1, is a circular continuum comprised of four levels of interaction - Reflective Observation (watching), Abstract Conceptualization (thinking), Active Experimentation (doing), and Concrete Experience (feeling).

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Smith, 2001)



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A PDS intern will engage in all four levels of the experiential model continuum during an academic year. As they are immersed in the experience of teaching in an authentic classroom, they are learning curriculum - content and pedagogy required by the state for licensure – partially through the experience as it is embedded into their daily responsibilities and activities. Simultaneously, they are engaged in pedagogy-based coursework where content is delivered in multiple modalities: constructivist strategies, didactic instruction, modeling via demonstrations and team teaching, case studies, technology, and practice, both guided and independent. Interns complete course assignments as part of classroom duties; therefore, they are synthesizing knowledge and engaging in reflective practice from the moment they step on the teaching and learning campus for in-service. Formal instruction through courses offers interns "consistent opportunities to apply what they are learning, analyze what happens and adjust their efforts accordingly" (Darling-Hammond & Bartz-Snowden, 2005, p. 31). Reflective opportunities occur as the University Liaison incorporates standards-based curriculum into discussions with the interns. The University Liaison and Master Teacher provide feedback related to a classroom activity, and the teaching intern reflects and writes about the experience and learning gained to provide meaning to the student teaching encounter.

Transformative learning occurs for the MT as well. Gajda and Cravedi examined experienced classroom teachers who served as clinical faculty and found the role of the MT may "upgrade the pedagogical knowledge and skill of veteran practitioners, and break down deeply entrenched school-community stereotypes" (2006, p.51).

Application of a PDS in Northeast Texas

In 2005 a regional university and school district in northeast Texas formed a partnership to implement a PDS using a Title I elementary school campus located within two miles of the university. The partnership agreement stipulated goals, mutual contributions and expectations, one of which was that all PDS participants—students, interns, master teachers, regular classroom teachers, administrators, supervisors, and university faculty—would be learners. Of paramount importance to these partners was insuring that teaching interns would receive an exceptional level of training, enabling them to pass all state standardized certification tests, and the public school students would have an exceptional learning environment resulting in improved gains on the annual standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The campus chosen for the PDS was a 50-year old former junior high. The single-story building had to be remodeled and retrofitted to accommodate modern technology and promote a more fluid learning environment. The final layout consisted of a single, long corridor,

flanked on both sides with three-room classroom suites. Every room opens to the hallway and the rooms of each suite open to each other. The new layout accommodates flexible grouping of students for differentiated instruction, team teaching, and modeling/demonstration. The campus also houses a Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD) and a central classroom for multi-handicapped students.

The campus serves approximately 400 students, pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, with a concentration of economically disadvantaged and racial minority students. Demographics of the student body have remained fairly consistent since the model was implemented five years ago. As of 2009/2010, the ethnic composition was approximately 75 % African American, 14 % Caucasian, and 10 % Hispanic; 95% of students are considered low socio-economic. Thirty percent of enrollment is transferred into the school. Approximately four percent of students are identified as Limited English Proficient (Hargus, Ballard & Ray, 2010).

In this PDS program, interns must apply by March 1 and be prepared to start work several weeks before the fall university term begins. The MT and interns assume all instructional responsibilities for approximately 40 students at each grade level. The remaining 22 students of each grade level are assigned to a traditional classroom with a certified teacher who also serves on a grade level team. A waiver for deviation in student/teacher ratio was granted by the Texas Education Agency to allow 40 volunteer students to be assigned to the three-member adult team, resulting in a student/teacher ratio of 1:16, in lieu of the standard 1:22. Interns observe every grade level to gain a holistic perspective of the school's program and needs of the student body. They document the observation visit with a reflective essay. Learning and competencies are assessed using a variety of authentic and constructivist strategies, including student observations, portfolio and reflection entries, case studies, projects, and traditional cognitive testing.

Now in its sixth year, this PDS is a sustainable, functioning public school. Sixty-two pre-service candidates have completed the PDS program and 100% passed all of their respective state's certification exams: TExES (Generalist-Content), PPR (Pedagogy and Profession) and Special Education (Early Childhood-12). The program has been modified annually based on intern scores from the state licensure exams, standardized test scores of the classroom students, ratings of professionalism and competency on standard referenced tasks, and final course grades. A wealth of qualitative data has been collected from MT/TI Focus Group Reports, MT/TI Surveys, student reflections, field notes, and employer feedback (Hargus, Ballard, & Ray, 2010).

Intern Outcomes

More than 50% of the PDS alumni are currently employed by the ISD partner. In all cases, the new teachers recruited from PDS cohorts began their careers with salaries comparable to second-year teachers rather than first. Teaching interns have actually recruited other students to participate in the program. Two PDS graduates of 2006, in different school districts in different states, received Teacher of the Year Award during spring of 2007. In a discussion regarding effectiveness of the program, a principal at a local high school described two of his new teachers, former PDS interns, as "more like third to fifth year teachers" in terms of experience. Interns have served on committees for textbook adoption and as grade level lead teachers (Hargus, Ballard, & Ray, 2010).

Classroom Student Outcomes

Student scores on state standardized assessments rose in every content area each year from the initial year of the PDS (2004-2005) to 2009/2010. The campus received an overall rat-

ing of Recognized in 2004; baseline assessment values for that year were: Reading 81%, Math 87%, Writing 87% and Science 43%d. Assessment values reported in 2009 were: Reading 95%, Math 91%, Writing 100%, and Science 80%. Assessment values dropped this past year, for unknown reasons as of this time. Scores reported in July of 2010 were: Reading 85%, Math 86%, Writing 97% and Science 88%. Overall improvements each year earned the school a rating of Recognized from 2008 to 2010 (Texas Education Agency Accountability Ratings Report, 2010).

District and University Outcomes

A collaborative, committed relationship built on trust is one of the most critical elements in establishing and sustaining a PDS, as new roles -- as well as strains and stressors -- will be encountered by both partners (Teitel, 2003). Each entity learns to work with new partners, yet "maintain their traditional memberships and roles in their home institutions" (Teitel, 2003, p.xiv). This PDS has been a win-win situation, primarily due to the symbiotic collaboration among all stakeholders. Because the school and university had already developed a professional, collegial relationship, trust grew rather quickly among administrators, teachers and other key staff. All parties admitted not having all the answers. Differences in schedules, professional focus, perceptions on personal autonomy, efficacy, academic freedom, and cultural differences emerged as critical elements where alternative perspectives had to be examined. The struggles have produced more than perseverance. In recognition of innovative thinking to advance learning, the program received the Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Education (SRATE) award in 2005 and the ISD Board of Trustees received the 2006 Magna Award from the American School Board Journal (Hargus, Ballard, & Ray, 2010).

The model has had an intriguing impact on the master teachers as well. Teachers receive collegial support of their practices and think much more about the learning and teaching process than they had before, according to the university liaison. Gradual changes in teaching style have been observed. One MT stated: "I analyze everything with a task analysis now and I think about everything that I teach so that I can better explain it to the interns." Another MT returned to the university to pursue a graduate degree because she was so inspired by her interns.

As the master teachers, principals, and interns began to publicly express their satisfaction with the model, the PDS gradually came to be viewed more as a viable teacher preparation program in the eyes of district personnel and university faculty. One principal summarized his satisfaction: "When I need new hires, I first look to PDS." True to his word, he hired PDS graduates when he staffed a new innovative Math and Engineering Elementary School (Hargus, Ballard, & Ray, 2010).

Challenges and Barriers

Resistance is an inherent by-product any time change is introduced. Education faculty from the university voiced doubts regarding an undergraduate's ability to serve as a pre-service teaching intern without having completed courses in curriculum and pedagogy. Some questioned the competencies of clinical faculty surrounding contemporary best practices for the classroom. District teachers were skeptical of this new collaborative learning relationship with professors from "the ivory tower," often perceived as out of touch with the realities of the classroom. Early in the program, master teachers held unreasonably high expectations and perceptions of the new interns, unfairly comparing them to the traditional student teacher that had historically completed the in-service component during their senior year. This caused some stress for the beginning cohort; however, MTs began to formulate a more realistic outlook after working with the university liaison. The university liaison was also challenged by the amount of additional time needed for PDS

meetings, supervision, and projects. This role was expected to participate in all aspects of the ISD school day and attend some after-school activities, concurrent with maintaining typical academic obligations, such as committee service, student advisement, and scholarship.

Conclusions and Implications

The PDS appears to have been largely successful due to four factors, all hallmarks of adult learning theory and practice: Ownership, Modeling, Teamwork, and Application of Course-Based Pedagogy. Because interns sign a contract, receive salary, benefits, and support from the district, they feel a sense of accountability and a member of the profession from the first day. They own the process, as well as their personal learning. In addition, the "new teacher" syndrome is thwarted as interns are appointed, and feel, a level of authority at the beginning. The children accept the intern as just another teacher. The master teacher models exemplary practices for an entire year. A full cycle of residency permits more thorough observation and allows the intern to fully understand the impact of decisions and methods. Furthermore, learning is strengthened by the "faculty team" structure. Autonomy and flexibility allow interns to try newly learned skills and experience the results under the instruction and guidance of the master teacher. As a common understanding and language develop between master teacher and interns, the sense collegiality strengthens and collaborative learning is enriched among all three individuals, thus facilitating the intern's transition into the profession. Because interns are involved in the decision-making process with the master teacher almost from the first day, they are not perceived as "outsiders" or "temporary guests" void of experience and knowledge. In the traditional, student teacher model, interns are taught methods, pedagogy and classroom management prior to entering the classroom. Discussion about hypothetical situations and case studies—while effective—keep the reality of a "real classroom" a semester away. With the Professional Development School, interns are presented with course content within the environment and, almost immediately, are able to apply the knowledge or behavior in their own classroom. Reflection time is purposely infused into their "curriculum" so that they can adequately draw new concepts from the experience, and plan modifications of future behaviors. The crowning feature is support from multiple sources and constructive, immediate feedback from the Master Teacher, university faculty, and PDS liaison.

Not every district is able to implement a PDS, but practices within the PDS model could be applied, with some modification, to any teacher preparation program. Experiential learning exercises, and critical reflection and analysis could be infused quite feasibly into all phases of teacher preparation, potentially producing more reflective, self-directed learners/teachers, with enhanced meta-cognitive skills. Residency periods could extend to two semesters and school districts could provide practicing teachers to model and mentor university students. Clearly, the PDS model warrants additional research, but the success of this site presents a strong argument for embracing more adult and experiential learning methods in teacher preparation so that all stakeholders become change agents for a lifetime.

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