***Novice Educator Realities: How do New Teachers Negotiate Varied School Contexts?***

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**ABSTRACT**:

To extend understandings of program influence on teacher performance, a group of teacher educators at one institution engaged in a multi-dimensional case study of program graduates. One goal was to frame the question of how new teachers experience school contexts. New teachers emerged as novice leaders who focused on students, sought community, and struggled in new contexts. Continued professional practice may be developed in structured communities of practice across contexts.

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***Introduction***

Developing and retaining skilled educators results from continuous and aligned support aimed at preparing teachers well from recruitment through preparation and in-service development (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Teacher educators should also maintain a big picture vision of teaching and learning and their complexity (Cochran-Smith et al 2016; Grossman et al., 2009). Novice teachers face a barrage of barriers to successful enactment of practice approximated in preparation experiences. Therefore teacher education may serve two purposes: supporting candidates in cultivating awareness of the realities of school cultures and being available to novice teachers as they navigate these cultures.

To extend understandings of program influence on teacher performance, a group of teacher educators at one institution engaged in a multi-dimensional case study of graduates. One goal for this study was to consider continuous improvement for the preparation programs. However, a larger goal for teacher education was to frame the question of how new teachers experience school contexts. In a consideration of “ambitious teaching and teacher education pedagogies” (McDonald, et al., 2013, p. 379), this research team collected multiple measures of teacher performance. This proposed paper addresses specific trends connected to novice educator experience responding to these questions:

*How do new educators and their employers/principals perceive preparedness to teach in the early years of teaching?*

*What are key aspects of new educator experiences as shared in communities of practice?*

***Theoretical Framework or Perspective***

Recognizing teaching and teacher education as a complex endeavor (Snow & Martin, 2014; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Davis & Sumara, 2006; Grossman et al., 2009), the authors endeavored to construct an opportunity for a unique model of induction that was mutually beneficial by joining with recent program graduates in an investigation of their teaching effectiveness and experiences in their early years of teaching. This community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) became a space for professional positioning and knowledge construction such that notions larger than classroom performance could be considered.

In terms of teaching practice, the programs were designed with early field experiences and support in scaffolding representations, decomposition, and approximations of practice (Grossman, et al., 2009). However, one must keep in mind that these instances of teaching and learning practice are situated within specific contexts in a preparation program. Individual actions are embedded within complex cultural, social, and historical activity systems (Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999) that mediate the outcomes of activity. Such outcomes – for example, those derived from participation in a specific teacher education program – are also dependent upon conceptual and practical tools (Grossman, et al., 1999). As such, the preparation program cannot practically prepare teachers for every possible school culture or eventuality.

***New Teacher Learning in Community***

Windschitl and colleagues (2011) studied new science educator practice with supported tools in induction similar to those used in preparation programs. New teachers need practical and conceptual tools to engage learning – their own and their P-12 students. Consequently, researchers in this case study employed multiple measures to document new educator engagement with a teacher work sample, *Studying Practice and Student Learning* (SPSL), where new educators practiced focused reflection on student learning and differentiating instruction for learners with diverse needs. Monthly workshops allowed negotiated learning to inquire into “problems of practice” and engage an inquiry stance toward teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Hoover (2010) identifies a need for comprehensive induction for learning in and from practice. She also recommends analysis of student work as embedding development in early years of teaching. This case study provided structure and tools for new teacher development while also creating a unique space where teachers across contexts – including school districts, grade levels and demographics –shared experiences of early years of teaching.

***Multiple Measures Case Study***

This study used data from part of a larger case study (Yin, 1984) of program graduate performance employing a mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano, 2007). Triangulation and complementary (Greene et al., 1989) were used to study the complex nature of teacher development. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative sources elaborated and enhanced varied and sometimes overlapping facets of the experience of teacher participation in this professional learning community and how it may have influenced teacher development and early practice. Quantitative and qualitative data sources were analyzed separately and then transformed, consolidated, and compared to establish points of convergence, elaboration and disagreements (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003; Creswell & Plano, 2007; Greene, 2007).

***Data Sources***

We invited teacher preparation program graduates in their first three years of teaching to participate in a community of practice around the SPSL and other measures of teacher performance. Twenty-five new teachers participated. The key focus for data in this proposal were the focus group interview transcripts conducted at SPSL workshops where new teachers engaged in the study of their instruction and focused reflection on their students’ learning.

***SPSL Workshops***

Participation in SPSL workshops included:

* Creating a unit plan, analyzing P-12 student data from its implementation, and reflective analysis on that plan and subsequent student learning
* Being observed by a Danielson trained (Danielson, 2013) university-affiliated observer three times
* Requesting their students take the Tripod survey (Ferguson, 2012)
* Participating in an alumni survey
* Participating in three focus groups with SPSL colleagues
* Arranging for their principal to be interviewed about their performance and sharing principal evaluations of teaching

The SPSL took place over the course of six months, with participants meeting once a month at the university. For the purposes of this study, we examined data from focus group and principal interview transcripts, as well as data from field notes during SPSL workshops.

***Focus Group and Principal Interviews***

Three different focus groups were held throughout the SPSL workshops. General topics included:

* Focus Group 1: Feelings of preparedness for several components of teaching
* Focus Group 2: How particular components of their preparation program influenced practice
* Focus Group 3: The impact of the SPSL on their practice

Participants were split into three different groups: first year elementary teachers; second or third year elementary teachers; secondary teachers.

The principals of each participant were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that focus on the preparedness of the new teacher – connected to the program, the qualities that led the principals to hire the new teacher, and points of need that the teacher education programs may need to address. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes.

Data was analyzed in an emergent fashion with attention to individual data sources. Beginning with initial coding (Charmaz, 2006) of transcripts and field notes from workshops, researchers met to discuss emerging themes and resolve discrepancies. We then applied focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) to review data once more and identify the following overarching themes.

***New Educators as Silent Leaders and Change Agents***

***Leading as new teachers***

Participants in this case study emerged as reflective thinkers and quiet leaders within SPSL workshops and their individual contexts. Principal interviews indicated that new educators were not afraid to step into leadership roles within grade level teams and within their school. For example, one teacher became the school trainer for a data management program while another attended district technology integration seminars and shared knowledge with school colleagues. Moreover, many new educators were adept at implementing core instructional practices in new contexts and were able to share ideas with teammates as they planned collaboratively.

***A focus on students***

Participants in this study were clearly focused on better understanding their students and implementing best practices to support them. A common manifestation of this was building strong classroom environments. One new teacher shared, “If we are showing integrity and teamwork and things like that, the students are going to be doing those things, and learning will come more naturally…” (Focus Group Transcript, 12/2015, p. 1). Several teacher participants also identified their emphasis on student engagement in instructional planning. “I think it’s really important, when you’re planning, to think about the student interests. I think that helps with that engagement piece and so I try to make things important for the kids” (Focus Group Transcript, 12/2015, p. 1).

***Challenge in varied contexts for practice***

Although these new teachers were prepared to focus on students and lead within new school contexts, they struggled with applying practical knowledge in new contexts. For example, one teacher participant shared, “I absolutely love differentiating – I think it’s like my favorite thing – it’s like a puzzle… But I don’t feel prepared to differentiate in math, if that makes sense” (Focus Group Transcript, 12/2015, p. 3). This indication of appreciation for a pedagogical skill did not necessarily transfer to multiple disciplines in the elementary classroom.

A second issue the new educators encountered was having the skills to handle specific behavioral issues. One teacher stated, “This year, I had kids flipping me off and I was never expecting that to happen. And yelling, yeah. But I never knew what to do with that” (Focus Group Transcript, 12/2015, p. 11). Another teacher noted she student taught with younger students but now had students in her class going through puberty and did not know how to handle those issues. Still another teacher mentioned difficulties working with parents; communication was not a problem in her student teaching placement. These educators concurred that they understood ‘big picture’ classroom management techniques, but did not know how to negotiate unexpected difficulties in this area.

Demographic aspects of school contexts also proved challenging. Some new teachers wrestled with novice professional practice in different environments from their preparation. One teacher was hired for her first year in a school culture quite different from where she student taught and struggled with teaching English Learners because she had only briefly gained knowledge and understanding of such skills in her program. A second teacher noted that there was a wide span of social classes in her classroom and she was currently working through how to talk with students who may ostracize others for not having the ‘right’ clothing. These issues were summed up by a teacher who said, “I had no clue that my class would be so culturally diverse” (Focus Group Transcript, 12/2015, p. 3).

***Growth Mindset Perseveres***

Overall, employers and teacher educators were pleased with the overwhelming proclivity to professional growth these new educators portrayed. Principals consistently mentioned new teachers “requested feedback.” They asked for principals and colleagues to observe them teach and share insights into practice-centered improvement. They were also skilled at developing professional learning plans required by the state as they had engaged in this process in program. Finally, they recognized the need to continue learning and were not afraid to ask for help. For example, the teacher quoted previously who loved differentiation but was not sure how to do so in mathematics followed up with “any suggestions?”

Likewise, other participants voiced appreciation for collaboration because it enhanced their learning: “[It’s] good talking to people from different schools, too, because things are so different...So I think this is just nice as another avenue of reflection” (Focus Group Transcript, 4/2016, p. 7). Another new educator even welcomed the teacher educator classroom observations: “[I appreciated] having the observations post-graduation because I feel like I don’t get a clear picture of how well I’m teaching, and I don’t really get those reflective questions” (Focus Group Transcript, 4/2016, p. 14).

***Continued Teaching of Professional Practice***

This case study of program graduates indicated promising novice professional practice. Even with successful program preparation, these new educators demonstrated appreciation for continued support and structures for reflective analysis of student learning during the workshops. Our findings indicate that focusing on the development of an inquiry stance toward teaching and a professional positioning toward knowledge that includes uncertainty supports early professional practice. Teacher education programs could better situate new educators as having the dispositions for continued learning of professional practice. Exit from a preparation program need not – *should not* – be the end of teacher education. This study demonstrates importance for continuing networks of professional learning focused on P-12 student growth to support the cultivation of novice teacher leaders who may remain in the profession.

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