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Abstract

This paper reviews current practices in preservice teacher education to suggest possible improvements that, if practiced, might help mediate many pressures young teachers face.

Here we (1) synthesize our recent research in the area of in-service teacher professional learning to inform teacher education programs and (2) use these research findings to suggest possible changes and improvements to pre-service teacher education programs. Synthesizing the research, we generate a “To Do List” of six activities we believe would improve pre-service education programs. We believe such instructional activities and pedagogies can become essential foundations that would help build more efficacious teachers, help stem the exodus from teaching, and help our teacher education programs begin to educate teachers for the wellness of long and healthy careers.

Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to (1) review and synthesize our own recent research in the area of in-service teacher professional learning as a way to inform teacher education programs and 2) consider and use these research findings to suggest possible changes and improvements to pre-service teacher education programs.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

As long-time working academic researchers, we have engaged – over our more than 80 combined years of academic work – in regular research over a wide variety of educational topics. More recently, since 1999, our work has concentrated in schools where we have had the great fortune to work side-by-side with teachers who are engaged in site-based action research. We have come to believe that such research engagement increases teacher learning and self-definition/self-image. The collected years of our partnerships with schools and with teachers as they have “worked their research” have impacted our thinking about how teacher education might be constructed. We have considered what we have seen occurring “in the field” and we have become thoughtful about how we might translate what we have been seeing into our own academic agenda – teacher education. Here we attempt to synthesize what we have seen and learned from teachers to apply to teacher education at the university undergraduate level, as we attempt to build teacher education programs that educate teachers towards improved student learning.

Our perspective focuses on the practical aspects of the applied research we have completed over the years and the conversations and insights we have had with teachers during that time. Specifically, our original research projects have asked and answered three

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questions: (1) What? {What did we find?}; (2) So What? {What do these findings mean?}; and, (3) Now What? {What should we do after we make sense of the findings?}. This paper focuses on analyzing and sharing findings in question #3.

Because this practical conceptual framework suggests best practices, this paper is intended to thoughtfully consider what our research might imply for remodeling or adding to teacher education programs. Our logic for constructing this paper stems from simple connections between what teachers say and show. In other words, we believe that the same activities that teachers say increase their own learning and efficacy might also increase the learning and efficacy of teacher candidates. Specifically, if teachers (over the course of our research with them) suggest that collaboration with colleagues increases their own efficacy, we believe that said same activity will also work to increase the efficacy of teacher candidates.

Methods, techniques, and data sources

To complete this paper, we have considered implications from research we have completed over the past twelve years. First, this paper synthesizes our work with teachers working with the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) since 1999. Our second research project was a two-year Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) sponsored case study of five effective elementary schools in Alberta. Third, we conducted an extensive literature review on *Student Engagement* and wrote a long report for the Alberta government as well as published an article on the same topic. Fourth, we interviewed Alberta teachers to author *Little Bits of Goodness* (2009) – a compilation of ten years of success stories from AISI. Fifth, we are currently engaged in a two-year, research project on teacher professional learning

and teacher efficacy that includes ten schools in five school divisions in Alberta. As we have worked on and completed this research, we have considered together the implications of the findings on teacher education programs.

Results, conclusions and/or interpretations

This paper considers what this research might mean for teacher education programs. We have attempted to make sense of these research insights to create a data-informed “To Do List.” Before new teachers take control of their first classrooms and build their teaching identity, we believe the following “To Do List” will aid them in their preparation:

To Do #1) Engage Teacher Candidates in Action Research

During our coursework, instruct and engage students in action research processes, ethics, and methods. Field experience can provide a lens through which pre-service teachers can focus on specific and relevant issues they will be challenged to address after they attain their degree and find themselves in their own classrooms. In research conducted with first year teachers, one common theme emerges – they do not feel prepared to deal with many of the realities in contemporary classrooms. Knowing and feeling confident in the processes of identifying and tackling context specific problems empowers beginning educators and ensures a substantially effective learning space for students.

Create and engage in real-to-classroom research – exploring issues of diverse learner abilities, language delays or deficiencies, multi-cultural populations, mixed socioeconomic communities, or external pressures of high stakes testing, for example. Empower pre-service teachers to seek information they can use to mitigate these realities; assign presentations of

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findings both within the classrooms and outside. Position education students as 'idea leaders.' Support processes for critical thinking: identify challenges; research the field; make informed decisions; engage ideas and solutions; try them out; keep track of the data; come back to discuss what you saw; what worked? What didn't work? What can be changed? In other words, do action research.

To Do #2) Engage Teacher Candidates in Collaborative Work

Engage young teachers in collaborative work. Working together to explain ideas, agree on a problem's root causes, determine a plan of action, agree on resources and task responsibilities, inspire colleagues, take learning risks, negotiate different personalities, build peer capacities, overcome barriers or unforeseen complications – such collaboration matches work taking place in successful schools. Much of this work reflects the core beliefs and philosophies of the school's teachers and its culture.

Teacher education activities should explicate the processes of translating teaching philosophies into actual classroom activities. Teachers often use pedagogies based upon their own learning experiences. If we want classrooms to become collaborative, innovative, and creative spaces where critical thinking and thoughtful reflection are the norm, then pre-service teachers must learn and practice collaboratively in creative spaces where innovation, critical thinking, and thoughtful reflection are the norm – modeled and expected by their professors.

To Do #3) Engage Teacher Candidates in Community, Agency, and Service

Build classroom cultures that support community, agency, and service. (Community

centered on working together. Agency simply meant the belief that one could make a difference. Service centered upon doing “good things” for others. In our experience speaking to young teachers, these three characteristics are what encouraged teachers to become teachers in the first place). Our research synthesized these three characteristics as motivators for teacher engagement. Supporting community, agency, and service might mean engaging in community-based projects outside of the university classroom that help young teacher candidates grow to believe they are capable of making a difference. Knowing that one’s actions can make a difference encourages one to take these actions.

To Do #4) Engage Teacher Candidates in Real Classroom Issues

Our research found that, as teachers came to share leadership within their own school, they were both able to solve real, site-based issues and concomitantly empower their own agency. School leadership broadened; the school population came to “ownership” of their shared space; and community building ensued. Teamwork worked well. Thus, we believe teacher candidates can and should work to solve real classroom issues, and do this work transparently. Allow students to become part of the classroom planning. Openly discuss issues about teaching and assessment. Help teacher candidates discuss the issues that matter to them as students, from the perspective of teacher. We believe a pre-service teacher education course can be a space where young teachers work with experienced teachers to think openly about all aspects of teaching – including the goals and assignments of the course being taken.

To Do #5) Engage Teacher Candidate in Celebrating Diversity

Work to allow and increase individual skills and interests. Celebrate diversity. Not

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all teachers have or need similar skills, so encourage young teachers to be more "at home" with their own abilities and provide opportunities to employ these diverse skills within the university classroom. This diversity might mean allowing differentiated instruction and different major assignments. As young teachers learn to accept their own diverse skills, they gain insights into how to accept their students' differences. And, these issues of diversity and how to engage it can also be part of To Do #4, where students work together to solve real classroom issues.

To Do #6) Engage Teacher Candidates in Building Culture

Allow young teachers to actively consider and discuss the kinds of cultures they hope to build in their classrooms and schools and practical ways those cultures might be built. Openly discuss how they will relate to their students in an age of social networking. Our experience in teacher education and the research we have engaged and read suggest that these activities can and should become explicit choices available in preservice education programs. Such instruction can become essential career foundations. Instead of attempting to explain the exodus – like an autopsy that attempts to explain the cause of an untimely demise, our teacher education programs can begin to celebrate the wellness of a long and healthy career.

Significance of the work

What would it mean to actually build this list into a teacher education program? We believe our To Do list offers practical ideas that will both help teacher candidates become more evidence-based practitioners as well help teacher candidates better match pedagogies they engage in as students with pedagogies that have proved effective in teaching. Our hope

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is to help build activities into our teacher education programs that would, indeed, help our young teachers begin to build identities and practices as “Master Teachers.”

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