Applied Learning in Teacher Education: Developing Learning Communities Among Pre-Service Candidates and Urban Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the practice of developing adult learning communities in university classrooms and urban elementary schools. These urban elementary schools serve as PreK-5, public school partners and function as real-life, applied learning laboratories for pre-service, teacher education candidates. The setting of this exploration is a large, urban city in the Northeast region of the United States of America. Two types of learning communities are explored: 1) classroom learning communities within the College of Education at a four-year university, and 2) school-based, professional learning communities within multiple urban elementary schools. Included in the discussion are the five stages of learning community development (Putnam & Burke, 2006), as well as descriptions of pre-service teachers’ investigations of learning communities and conclusions drawn from both sets of participants.

INTRODUCTION

School leaders seek to hire new teachers who are well-trained and exposed to a variety of instructional strategies and situations as part of their pre-service, teacher education programs. Principals expect novice teachers to display a certain level of enthusiasm and commitment to learning as a growth process, especially considering their lack of extensive experience as a classroom instructor (Noddings, 2003). Teacher training experiences involving urban settings are especially appealing to school leaders situated in major cities or the immediately surrounding communities (Nieto, 2000).

For the vast majority of American undergraduate education students, however, teaching in urban schools is not their foremost thought as they enter into university training. One university’s College of Education, through newly established school-based partnerships in an urban community, believes opportunities to broaden undergraduate students’ teaching and learning experiences in urban settings may potentially change students’ attitudes and beliefs toward urban education. Some research suggests that certain applied learning experiences (i.e. professional practice, community service, and multiple applied experiences) may also enhance both cognitive and affective development among undergraduate students (Wolff & Tinney, 2006).

The new requirement, in effect for the past two years, for all pre-service teachers at this particular four-year university is to spend one, sixteen-week semester learning about and engaging in the process of teaching in urban school settings in partial fulfillment of mandatory coursework in the teacher training programs. Whether preparing for secondary English, K-12 music, pre-school, or a middle school math teaching position, the goal for all pre-service teachers is to further develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions as they relate to teaching and learning in urban settings.
The College of Education: A Focus on Learning Communities

The College of Education embraces “The Learning Community in Action” as the conceptual framework for all teaching and learning that occurs within and beyond its’ walls. The framework is based on educational research conducted by Putnam & Burke (2006, 2010) and supports a belief that in a democratic and socially just society, learning communities are central to the educational process. Within the learning community, academic achievement, personal responsibility, social responsibility and social justice must be valued. Furthermore, professional educators must be instructional leaders, and demonstrate a cooperative disposition, a developmental perspective and a reflective orientation. Finally, all members of learning communities should value and strive to: identify common needs and purposes, see peers as colleagues, seek self and group actualization, recognize other groups as similar, reflect on past actions, help and be helped, and celebrate accomplishments (Putnam & Burke, 2006). The College concurs with Putnam & Burke (2006) in concluding learning communities are most effective when the five stages of group development are implemented: beginnings (stage 1), establishing expectations (stage 2), identifying and resolving conflict (stage 3), supporting and expanding production (stage 4), and providing for transitions and closure (stage 5).

Curriculum and Program Delivery

Within the College of Education, the Teaching in Learning Communities 1 (TLC 1) course is the first required class for all pre-service teachers and promotes the development of classroom-based and school-wide communities of learning through the use of five stages of learning community development (Putnam & Burke, 2006). These five stages form the basis for in-class modeling and discussions on how to implement each detail in the progression of development, from the beginning stage of establishing an effective learning community (stage 1) through the final stage of transitions and closure (stage 5). Through active participation in an adult learning community facilitated by their professor, pre-service teachers “learn by doing” – this dynamic, on-going example of learning community enables undergraduate students to more readily identify and participate in school-based learning communities.

University students in TLC 1 are paired and assigned to elementary classrooms to participate in developing learning communities in one of the most impoverished school systems in America. The field experience design matches one TLC 1 class (each class consists of approximately 26 students) with one urban elementary school (each school consists of approximately 300-450 students). For a regularly-sized TLC 1 class, this translates to 13 pairs of university students who become part of 13 urban classrooms, for a seven week period, in a single elementary school. This structure allows classroom teachers to become teaching and learning partners with the university students by sharing instructional knowledge and implementing curriculum. Teacher candidates are strongly encouraged to view this as a participatory experience, not simply an observational experience. From this perspective, pre-service teachers grow in their sense of personal responsibility and ownership of learning activities in the urban classroom.

School-University Partnerships: An Opportunity to Develop Professional Learning Communities

One of the growing trends in American public school systems is the concept of Professional Development School (PDS) partnerships, which is a formal agreement between a university and K-12 schools to work together in training and educating pre-service teachers. In the midst of this process, in-service teachers are also mentored, research is conducted, and improving student learning remains a central goal. Rather than continuing to widen the gap of misunderstanding between educational theory and practice, PDS partners embrace the opportunity to create understanding and develop common goals.
for student learning. Whereas tensions have historically existed between schools and universities, professional development schools may indeed be the right places to begin to resolve those tensions (Teitel, 2003).

The four-year university participating in this partnership is located less than twenty miles from two major urban centers in the Northeast region of the United States. Since these large, urban school districts reside a short distance from the main campus, the creation of formal university-school partnerships in learning appeared mutually beneficial. The city public schools, with 23 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, and 5 high schools, formally joined in partnership with the university two years ago. Linking the Teaching in Learning Communities 1 course with city elementary schools ensures an applied learning experience for all pre-service teachers in an urban setting.

Urban School Environment

Based on socio-economic factors, the city is consistently included among the lowest ranking cities in the continental United States. As a single, large-scale school district, dependent upon state-funding and the resulting bureaucracy regarding decision-making processes, a variety of issues earn daily attention from school leaders and politicians, ranging from student discipline within a single school to district-wide curricular initiatives.

The ethnic composition of students in the city schools is predominantly African-American (over 80%) and Latino-American (approximately 15%). Caucasian and Asian-American students combined represent the remaining 5% of the overall student population. Elementary schools in this city function as “neighborhood schools” where all families residing on the streets immediately surrounding a school will attend that school. Students at the elementary level walk to and from school each day, to assist in eliminating expenses and bus activity on narrow roads. Families are welcome to visit in the elementary schools during the academic day. Many schools contain a “community room” with comfortable sofas, or tables and chairs, magazines on schooling and family issues, textbooks, computers, and coffee, tea, and water where parents, guardians, and other members of the community may meet to talk, rest, or read. The neighborhood feel of these schools pave the path for professional learning communities to develop within school walls. Teachers, staff, and volunteers all participate in various forms and with varying degrees of involvement in their professional learning communities, since the state board of education mandates the existence of learning communities in each public school.

The elementary schools generally consist of grades PreK-5, with average overall enrollment at each school consisting of 300-400 students. Often, there are three or four grade-level classrooms, so teachers may plan and prepare learning activities together. Scheduling in some schools is quite complex, in order to allow teachers and staff to engage in “common times” whereby their preparatory periods are at the same time, in order to maximize instructional planning and assistance for needy learners. Most schools do not have central air conditioning, or upgraded amenities throughout the building, but the use of student work and brightly colored bulletin boards aid in providing a welcoming environment.

Exploring Urban Learning Communities

While the focus of this applied learning experience is to participate in teaching and learning activities, it is also an exploration of urban schooling and opportunity to grow in understanding and appreciation of urban education. As pre-service teachers enter into these classrooms for the first time, many return to the university classroom with obvious, observational comments. “There were so many students!” and “Security guards checked my purse.” These initial responses focus largely on the physical
learning environment. Through the use of three specific course assignments created for this seven-week field experience, the focus of pre-service teachers’ observations transforms into more learner-centered responses.

The first assignment requires each pre-service teacher to provide a written overview of the classroom – the physical setting, descriptions of routines and procedures, and detailed schedule of the day. Then university students identify specific observations and list inferences made from those observations in a chart form. Differentiating between observations and inferences is a critical first step in establishing accurate understanding of the urban classroom.

The second assignment explores the roles and responsibilities of learning community members. Specifically, pre-service teachers observe for the dispositions of learning community members – identifies common needs and purposes, sees peers as colleagues, seeks self and group actualization, recognizes other groups as similar, reflects on past actions, helps and can be helped, and celebrates accomplishments. Observations which illustrate the propensities of teachers – instructional leadership, developmental perspective, cooperative disposition, and reflective orientation comprise the latter half of the assignment. University students respond to two questions: 1) Where and when do I observe these dispositions and propensities in action; and 2) How does what I observe support this specific disposition or propensity?

The third assignment examines the degree of multi-cultural awareness and integration into the overall school environment, with questions that focus on educational programs and experiences, classroom practices, and resources available to families and the local community. In thinking about these questions, pre-service teachers truly begin to synthesize information and assess disparities between stated beliefs and daily practice. All teachers, whether pre-service or veteran in-service, maintain a sense of commitment to their craft through dialogue with peers, ongoing and consistent study, and by engaging in deep reflection about instructional content and delivery (Nieto, 2000).

Lessons Learned from Pre-Service Teachers in University Learning Communities

As the sixth largest teacher preparation program on the East Coast, the College of Education offers this urban experience to approximately 850 students each academic year. As educators trained in a learning community environment, students’ overall responses to the applied learning experience and assignments are perhaps best described by the following three statements.

1. Understand one’s personal responsibility in the process of learning.

   Effective teaching in a learning community involves each person valuing and practicing the learning community principles (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Seeking to improve one’s self is a continual process. To actively participate in learning is a far cry from passively sitting at a desk, biding time. Those who take every opportunity to pursue their own growth and development, in doing so, will inspire others.

2. Commit to teaching for social responsibility.

   Partnering with urban teachers at this early stage in university training provides concrete experiences for pre-service teachers to increase their understanding of social and cultural factors embedded in the education of all students. Teacher candidates identified the conditions considered as requirements for universal education to occur also happen to be the conditions of learning communities: schools need to be safe places, with open and active environments, fair standards of conduct and achievement, and encourage collaborative and cooperative societies.
3. See the world of learning as an opportunity to pursue social justice.

When teachers and students focus on learning as a response to real-world issues and problems, the learning process is no longer viewed as a chore. Rather, it changes into the vehicle for transforming our world. Knowledge becomes liberating, and real solutions emerge.

Suggestions for School Leaders in Professional Learning Communities

Centering schools on learners and learning requires an unalterable commitment that all children can and do learn. Leading effective learning communities in diverse settings involves continuous reflection on instructional strategies and practices, as well as instructional and interpersonal interactions at all levels.

1. Model the value of life-long learning.

Effective learning communities and professional development school partnerships recognize student learning is the clear purpose for any school organization. Students will model the behavior of leaders and teachers they respect. For example, if reading is an important activity in your building, then let students and teachers see you reading on a regular basis. Frequent and honest displays of valued behaviors is most desired (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004)

2. Seek solid partnerships with other schools or universities to enhance teacher practice and student learning.

Recognize the extensive resources you might have overlooked. Colleges and universities can support and enhance your school initiatives in multiple ways and provide on-going training by sharing the latest research in best-practices. Partnerships can address issues of increasing teacher leadership opportunities in your school and support the development of teacher quality through mentoring relationships among cooperating teachers, pre-service teachers, and university faculty (Teitel, 2003).

3. Understand and practice the principles of learning community.

Developing an authentic learning community in your school requires both knowledge and effort. One or the other is simply not enough. Supporting and maintaining the conditions necessary for learning communities to thrive is of equal importance. The active participation of school leaders is essential (Fullan, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

We live, work, and play in an increasingly global society. Students’ learning experiences are multi-faceted in nature - involving distance learning labs, Smartboards, apprenticeships with experts in the field, and more frequent connections with other learners from around the globe. These connections with other learners sharpen our own understandings as well as spur us on to new ideas. Partners in learning must seek to provide pre-service teachers a solid understanding of what effective learning communities look like in diverse settings and how to establish them in their own classrooms and schools.

In the past, educational institutions have not been fully supportive of the goals of continuous learning and self-reflection. "The history of the cycles of improvement of teacher education and of schooling show, at best, a lack of coordination and often a complete disconnection, along with associated finger-pointing and blaming" (Teitel, 2003, p. 2). However, the principles and practice of learning communities confront this history and provide a new paradigm for teaching and learning. Applied learning experiences represent a powerful pedagogical strategy to provide every student opportunities wherein they can develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for future success in
intellectual and social pursuits (Wolff & Tinney, 2006). All members of the learning community can benefit from sustained, professional engagement with one another.

REFERENCES


