Reflection on Experiences in Becoming Teachers through ePortfolio Development

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Abstract: This study identifies key factors that enable teacher education candidates to become reflective in practice. Reflective practices learned by developing an ePortfolio to document the challenges and successes experienced in learning to teach are analyzed from candidates comments made during exit interviews, ePortfolio presentations, and responses to a questionnaire.
Keywords: reflection, ePortfolio

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that help teacher education candidates meet the challenges of learning to become teachers. The challenges and successes teacher education candidates encounter in this process are documented in ePortfolios that are developed as part of their teacher education program. Evidence of the candidates growth as reflective practitioners and their increasing abilities to overcome challenges are recorded in their ePortfolios and later serve as data from which they are able to reflect on their professional growth as teachers and to provide evidence of their teaching identities.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Teaching is a "multidimensional" act (Doyle, 1986) that requires teachers to know content, know how to teach it, and know how to engage students in the process of learning. Learning to become a teacher requires mastering a formidable set of complicated events. Throughout the process of learning to teach, candidates are faced with myriad expectations from their college instructors, university supervisors and the mentor teachers with whom they are placed to learn the norms of classroom practice. Learning to survive such challenges, candidates cultivate resiliency drawing from personal resources as well as teacher, peer or parental support (Klem & Connell, 2004; Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007).

Learning to teach is a process that also requires the authenticity of working with students from diverse backgrounds and with a range of abilities in clinical settings, (Hart, Research Associates, 2010). Situated learning in K-12 classrooms has been viewed as a way to better structure teacher preparation to support candidates' growth and development, (Levine, 2009). In addition to claims from novices regarding the worth of experiences in K-12 classrooms, three critical features of teacher preparation directly tied to practice are identified in the recent (March, 2010) policy brief from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). These features include: 1) integration among courses and between course work and clinical work in schools; 2) extensive and intensive supervision of clinical work; and 3) proactive relationships with schools to develop and model good teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Candidates can also grow professionally through continuous reflection on

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their practice and progress documented through development of an ePortfolio (Ayan & Seferoglu, 2011).

The main purposes of electronic portfolios are student learning, reflection and accountability/accreditation and finally employment. In order for teacher candidates to be successful they must have good reflective practices in the classroom. ePortfolios can increase reflection, develop content and pedagogy skills and facilitate communication between teachers and administrators (Shepherd & Skrabut, 2011). Development of an ePortfolio can enhance reflection and promote personal inquiry (Shepherd & Skrabut, 2011). The use of electronic portfolios in teacher education emanates from the constructivist tradition of using portfolios to foster deep student reflection and learning (Strudler & Wetzel, 2011). Strudler and Wetzel suggest that students are more engaged when they can choose the pieces that will be included in their portfolio (p. 166). Teacher candidates and faculty also agree that reflective practices were substantive when they were thoughtfully implemented and lead to greater student learning (p.166). Additionally, teacher education candidates needed feedback on their work from their mentors in a timely manner to get the most out of their experience.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study is situated in a 21st Century Schools Partnership between a large urban school district and a college of education in the Southwest. One goal of the partnership was to create an innovative practice-based curriculum for teacher education. During a series of three-semester long practica, each teacher education candidate developed an ePortfolio documenting the challenges and successes of their journey in becoming teachers. When candidates can see in ePortfolios what they have accomplished throughout the program, their confidence and resiliency to the challenges of teaching increase.

Comments of 70 teacher education candidates during exit interviews and comments made during their presentations of culminating ePortfolio projects were recorded and analyzed. Candidates also responded to an open-ended questionnaire addressing the challenges they faced during their practicum, the teacher education program, and in helping students learn. The questionnaire also asked what role their university instructors and their school-based mentors had in their development as teachers. Candidates were asked to cite any evidence of professional collaboration and community building among their peers that helped them through the program.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from comments made during exit interviews and ePortfolio presentations that learning to teach is a community affair. Because the 21st Century School Partnership placed a cohort of teacher education candidates at one school, the candidates were able to form a community of teacher education learners and then benefitted from their interactions with other members of the cohort. Three emerging themes developed from the content that was studied: 1) challenges faced by teacher candidates, 2) supporting roles of mentor teachers, and 3) professional collaboration. Many of the teacher candidates felt that what they were learning in their courses did not make sense until they were actually working in the classroom. Many students struggled with making sense of what was being taught in their university courses and why it was being taught. Once candidates had a chance to experience the theories in practice in k-5 classrooms teacher education course work became more meaningful. Teacher candidates that had completed "teaching English as a second language" (TESL) courses were able to make

clear connections between what they had learned in university coursework to what they could do to help ELL students learn. One of the biggest challenges teacher candidates experienced was an overwhelming feeling of being unprepared. It was evident in candidate comments that there was a general feeling of being unprepared for teaching no matter how many courses they had taken or techniques and theories they had learned.

SUPPORT FROM PEERS

Teacher candidates gained a great deal of support from their mentor teachers. Mentor teachers are rated as a highly influential aspect of the teacher education program. Many students expressed that without their mentor teachers, which included professors on campus, and teachers in the classroom they wouldn't have learned the skills needed to be successful in the classroom. Teacher candidates felt that the mentor teachers in the program truly cared about their education.

An analysis of candidates' comments also demonstrated that professional collaboration is of great importance in a successful teacher education program. Partnership with the school district benefits all teacher candidates. Teacher education candidates collaborating with each other and with their mentor teachers help candidates become life-long learners.

DISCUSSION OF THE EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Identifying factors that produce excellent teachers can help shape revisions of current teacher education programs. With the wide spread adoption of alternative route to licensure programs, it is imperative that teacher educators become aware of the elements that are fundamental to helping candidates learn to teach and which components of teacher education programs need to be revised or discarded. ePortfolios are implemented in teacher education programs to support teacher candidates in the process of reflecting on their practicum experiences (Batson, 2010; Wetzel, Strudler, Addis, & Luz, 2009). Such ePortfolios can also provide data for program accreditation and enhance job applications for the candidates. As teacher educators we must ensure that appropriate standards for completion of ePortfolios are taken into consideration and that the ePortfolios meet the goals of the teacher education program they are designed to enhance.

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