

Summer 7-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Boling, Charlotte J. and White, Jill T. (2007) "Interactions with Highly Qualified Teachers," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 21 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol21/iss1/5>

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Interactions with Highly Qualified Teachers

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Abstract

Two faculty members walked to class on a Thursday evening. As they walked, they talked about the content of their respective courses. By the time the faculty members reached their classrooms, an action research project had evolved. The focus of the project was twofold: 1) to increase the awareness of teacher education candidates of the responsibilities of classroom teachers and 2) to apply the research and/or theory the veteran teachers had acquired in their master's culmination class. This article provides an overview of the events which developed as a result of the interactions between the practicing teachers and the pre-service teachers who had an opportunity to interact during the project.

Interactions with Highly Qualified Teachers

The teacher is the “cornerstone” of our educational system. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes a teacher possesses are essential components in the teaching and learning process. Teacher education faculty are charged to provide students with a comprehensive foundation of content knowledge and pedagogical skills. The newly acquired knowledge and skills provided by quality teacher preparation programs result in pre-service teachers becoming educational “cornerstones” who are considered highly qualified. Based on the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), a highly qualified teacher must have 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.

Few educational issues have received more attention in recent times than the failure to ensure all classrooms are staffed with highly qualified teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Teacher education programs strive to ensure that the curriculum for pre-service teachers is grounded in content and pedagogical knowledge, is realistic, and addresses the demands of teaching (Chen, 2002). McElroy (2005) contends that novice teachers need the opportunity “to observe master teachers, talk with colleagues about teaching and put to use the guidance offered by mentors who review the novice teachers' practices” (p. 8). These interactions tend to promote professional success and result in more teachers staying in educational fields (Trubowitz, 2004).

Pre-service teachers need the opportunity to interact and question masterful teachers to gain knowledge related to the teaching profession. Pre-service students usually don't have this opportunity until they enter their student teaching experience. Therefore, the focus of this action research project was twofold: 1) to increase the awareness of teacher education candidates of the responsibilities of classroom teachers and 2) to apply the research and theory the practicing teachers had acquired in their master's culmination class. The guiding question

for the study became “How will pre-service teachers and practicing teachers benefit from the opportunity to interact in an unstructured environment?”

Theoretical Framework

This study explored the interactions between pre-service candidates and practicing teachers based on the theoretical underpinnings of Vygotsky (1962), Ausebel (1968), and Bruner (1966). These theories are based on a combination of cognitive learning theory and social interactions among learners. This theoretical framework also provides the foundation for a mentoring experience.

Fabillar & Jones (2003), as well as Bruner (1966), report that educators need opportunities to examine new information and be given time to interact with colleagues. In this project, the researchers sought to provide opportunities for interactions between pre-service students and highly qualified teachers. Our hopes were that the interactions would provide “teachable moments” as well as opportunities for prudent dialogue. Our fears were that the two groups would not be willing to interact.

Research Method

This action research project focused on a case study design to explore the interactions between pre-service and practicing teachers (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1998). Case study methodology is suggested in *The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education* (Grossman, 2005) to help educators “make informed decisions and . . . to adopt an inquiry-stance into their teaching” (p. 429). This case study, bound by time and place, describes the relationships forged and the information exchanged between participants. This study took place during a 16-week semester at a southeast, mid-sized university.

Participants

The participants in the study were 43 undergraduate students and 12 graduate students. The undergraduate students, referred to as the pre-service participants, were exploring education as a possible career choice. The graduate students were practicing teachers completing a reading master’s program and referred to as the practicing participants.

The Pre-service Participants. The pre-service participants included 43 students enrolled in an *Introduction to Education* course. This course is one of three pre-requisite courses for students who seek admission to the teacher education program. The class was composed of 22 females and 11 males. The majority of the class was Caucasian with the exception of two female African American students.

The educational backgrounds of the pre-service participants varied. The backgrounds included three re-entry students who already had bachelor’s degrees; ten students seeking admission to the teacher education program; four pursuing degrees in other areas (psychology, marine biology, history, and math); and 26 freshmen or sophomores intending to major in education.

The Practicing Participants. The practicing participants were comprised of 12 graduate students enrolled in *Research and Trends in Literacy Education*. The participants were all practicing, female teachers from local elementary, middle, and high schools. Eleven participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. Among the participants were four elementary teachers, two special education teachers, two middle school teachers, one high school teacher, two literacy coaches, and one district level supervisor.

The range of teaching experience spanned from 2 to 17 years among the group. Several of the practicing teachers were awarded *Teacher of the Year* in their respective schools, others were National Board Certified, and most have been supervising teachers for pre-service teachers. The practicing participants were also graduate students completing a reading master's degree program and met the criteria of a highly qualified teacher.

Procedures

Instructors designed the curriculum of their respective courses with several common topics, albeit at different levels. Pre-service teachers became aware of the topics while the practicing teachers were required to critique the topics. These topics included 1) characteristics of highly qualified teachers; 2) responsibilities of classroom teachers; and 3) effective teaching and learning practices. The instructors then designed assignments to be completed by both the undergraduate and graduate students. The assignments were as follows:

Questions. The initial assignment for this research project was to have students in the *Introduction to Education* class submit at least two questions they would ask practicing teachers if given the opportunity. The practicing teachers, in turn, were asked to submit at least two questions they would ask teacher education candidates. Approved questions were used in the semi-structured interviews.

Threaded Discussions. The second assignment required the participants to reply to a threaded discussion posted on the supplemental online component for each class. Participants responded to the following open-ended statement: "I chose (or am choosing) education as my career path because....."

Interviews. The first interactions between the two groups took place in a large theater style classroom. Prior to the interviews and discussions, the practicing teachers introduced themselves to the pre-service teachers. Each shared the grade level they taught and their area of expertise. After the introductions, the pre-service participants were grouped with the practicing participants based on subject area and grade level interests. For example, one practicing middle school teacher was grouped with five pre-service candidates who were interested in becoming middle school teachers. The semi-structured interviews then ensued with participants using the approved questions as a discussion guide.

Reflections. After the interviews, participants were asked to review the notes they had taken during the interview process and to reflect on their experiences. Each participant was then asked to submit a one-page reflection describing the highlights and information acquired

during the interaction.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected and triangulation achieved using participant observation, non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, field notes, and artifacts. Observations included notes taken by the researchers during the participant interviews. Field notes included notes taken by the researchers, notes taken during class sessions, notes taken during the participant interviews, and reflective notes taken after the interviews. Artifacts included the questions written by participants, threaded discussion postings, interviewing notes, and reflections.

Data Analysis Procedures

The constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data. Data were organized into sets: field notes, interviews, and artifacts. Data were analyzed searching for the answer to the guiding research question: How will pre-service teachers and practicing teachers benefit from the opportunity to interact in an unstructured environment?"

As themes emerged from the data, two distinct categories of concerns were identified. The researchers labeled the two themes as concerns related to internal issues and concerns related to external issues in the teaching profession. Researchers then compared each piece of data to the identified themes and to the guiding question.

To further investigate the emerging themes and validation of the focus of the project, raw data for each theme were tallied. A frequency chart for each theme was developed. The themes with the highest frequency for each question were identified and explored further. Findings for this study are discussed in the next section.

Findings

The findings for this study have been categorized as internal and external concerns of pre-service and practicing teachers. Internal concerns were defined as those attributes that require thoughtful and reflective practice by the teacher. The themes which emerged for internal concerns were problem solving, mentoring, and decision making. External concerns were defined as those professional activities teachers participate in beyond the normal work day. The themes identified as external concerns related to life-long learning, professionalism, and self-efficacy. The findings are provided in Sections 1 and 2.

Section 1: Internal Concerns

The overarching responses from the participants related to issues concerning problem solving in the classroom, counseling and mentoring of students and colleagues, and making important professional decisions. Of the three emerging themes identified in this section, problem solver and counselor/mentor issues were of equal concern. Decision making was of greatest concern for these participants.

Problem solving

The problem solving theme was defined by environmental and behavioral issues that require the attention of teachers. These themes included discipline, assessment, and parental issues. Advice offered by practicing teachers included statements such as:

“[You need to] Decide how to deal with problems that arise in the class.”

“Keep a paper trail. If a student does fail the high stakes test, have documentation that supports the score.”

“Work with parents and help them understand how to help their children succeed in school and on state tests.”

These items addressed issues which extend beyond the academic classroom setting yet still require action by the teacher. Classroom management, parent issues, and high stake testing anxieties were a few of the issues discussed. Pre-service participants sought advice concerning these common problems that highly qualified teachers solve in an apparently effortless manner.

Mentoring

Mentoring was defined as influencing, shaping, and supporting the ideals of teaching and learning. These elements include the challenges faced by pre-service and practicing teachers as they work with students. Participants viewed mentoring as an important element in the enhancement of the teaching profession. Responses included:

“You will always be a mentor regardless of the grade you teach.”

“You are the child’s teacher, guidance counselor, and mentor.”

“Teachers must do everything from teaching to mothering to doctoring.”

The commonalities in this theme are the ways teachers interact and support students in all aspects of their education. Understanding that students have issues extending beyond the classroom helps teachers develop a better relationship with their students. These participants indicated that even though the mentor role is intense and time consuming, it is important that students feel valued by their teacher.

Decision-Making

Teachers are required to make decisions concerning a host of issues on a daily basis. Some of those decisions are impromptu while others are contemplated for long periods of time. After careful review, the researchers discovered that most of the decision-making responses involved classroom instruction. Participants were concerned about pedagogy and the complexities involved in teaching and learning. Examples of statements from the

participants included:

“Have to think about how to deal with children in the same room on different education levels.”

“Must help children who don’t get it and come up with better ways to assist them in learning.”

“Make sure students grasp all concepts using different methods.”

The findings indicated that although participants had similar concerns regarding internal problems related to teaching and learning, the practicing participants were able to provide examples of how to specifically address problem solving, mentoring, and decision making issues that arise in the classroom. The interactions and interviews among the participants provided dialogue that allowed the practicing teachers to begin mentoring pre-service participants and to openly convey their enthusiasm toward teaching.

Section 2: External Concerns

The second theme that emerged from the data related to responses identified as external concerns. The dominant themes for the external concerns of teaching were life-long learning, self-efficacy, and professionalism. While life-long learning and self-efficacy were considered important, the overwhelming theme was professionalism.

Life-long Learning

The life-long learning theme was defined by the researchers as those philosophies and specific behaviors that indicated a need for or participation in continual learning. During the interview, pre-service participants were encouraged by the practicing participants to complete their degree programs and continue their education by obtaining advanced degrees in their related field. Advice given by the practicing participants included:

“You are a teacher but also a student.”

“Educators are also learners and to ensure they’re giving the best instruction in a continually changing society, educators must stay open minded and have an attitude that’s motivated toward continuing their education so they can be their best.”

“You learn everyday. You have to continually keep learning.”

The most common statement emerging from the life-long learning theme centered on a genuine interest in learning. Participants indicated that learning is an integral component of teaching. Furthermore, teachers should continually pursue knowledge in order to ensure that their students are prepared to be productive members of society.

Self-efficacy

Believing that one possesses the skills and knowledge necessary to educate another is a necessary component of teaching. Researchers defined this theme based upon the beliefs shared and confidence exhibited by the participants. Self-efficacy was clearly evident in the following statements:

“You need to have a clear understanding of what you are teaching.”

“I’m a good teacher. I’m a good teacher because I have great classroom management and understand the learning process. I can make a difference for students.”

These participants identified self-efficacy as an external concern that influences their ability to be a highly qualified teacher. The most common statement emerging from the self-efficacy theme centered on the participants’ perception in their abilities; each believed they could improve student achievement based on their teaching expertise.

Professionalism

Professionalism was by far the dominating theme for issues related to external concerns of teaching. Responses included statements referring to professional behavior as:

“Learning is very important. I feel it is very important to adapt and stay up-to-date to be effective.”

“Act in a professional manner, dress professionally, and address parents professionally to gain respect.”

Participants stated they valued new research and improved teaching techniques. They indicated that attending workshops and graduate classes were important in order to stay abreast of new information. Participants also wanted to be perceived as professionals. They agreed that being professional means that a teacher acts and dresses accordingly; but most of all, in the words of a practicing participant, a professional educator “knows her stuff!”

The major themes emerging from the data regarding external concerns were life-long learning, self-efficacy, and professionalism. The findings indicated that participants valued continued learning and believe it is necessary in order to be an effective teacher. The data revealed that all the participants wanted to be viewed as professional and sought ways to enhance that professionalism.

Conclusions

Specific questions asked by the pre-service participants during the interviews, panel discussion, and subsequent e-mails to researchers provided answers to the guiding research

question: *How will pre-service teachers benefit from an interaction with practicing teachers?* Findings indicate that pre-service teachers valued their experience with the practicing teachers. They gained practical information about the learning process, became informed of tasks required of a teacher, and developed a renewed interest in teaching based on the real world examples offered by the practicing teachers.

The practicing participants responded to the interview and panel discussion questions in a sincere and candid manner. They became very engaged with the pre-service participants and assumed the role of educational “experts” (Alvy, 2005). An example of this occurred when one practicing teacher responded to a discipline question with the following statement:

“I try to figure out why the student is misbehaving. If a student is misbehaving, it is probably for a good reason. I get to know my students so that I can figure out what’s going on when they act weird. Most of the time, I just pull them aside and talk with them. As soon as they can let out whatever is bothering them, they are ready to learn. But as long as whatever it is, is bottled up, it’s hard for them to concentrate.”

Practicing participants assumed leadership roles throughout the discussions. For example, one teacher explained that her goal was to create a successful classroom environment where her students enjoyed learning without fear of corporal punishment. She stated, “The key is to set rules and distinguish between discipline and punishment. Be consistent and fair.” These responses seemed to help pre-service participants understand discipline as a management technique rather than a system for control.

Additional suggestions from the practicing participants were offered for ways to involve parents. These suggestions included sending home newsletters and citizenship reports, making personal phone calls, keeping behavioral logs, and establishing homework folders. The practicing teachers indicated that “communication was the most important aspect of parental involvement.” One teacher encouraged impromptu visits and parental involvement by having an open-door policy. She said, “Parents are always welcomed in my classroom.” The pre-service students seemed to appreciate the teaching tips. Their appreciation was evidenced by the volume of notes taken while the practicing participants shared the practical information.

Another area of interest for the pre-service participants was specific details about a “typical day” for a teacher. The practicing participants described a host of topics that included arranging classroom furniture, curriculum for instruction, and collecting lunch money. The subsequent conversations between the participants were animated and engaged.

E-mails received by the researchers from the participants also supported the findings of the study. Practicing participants indicated they received affirmation from the interactions with the practicing teachers. One practicing teacher wrote, “Just thought I’d let you know one of the students from Dr. X’s class dropped by my room today. He had such wonderful questions about teaching. He asked the kinds of questions pre-service teachers need to ask! Thank you so much for letting us do this with them. I think we really made a difference for some of them.”

Similar e-mails were received from the pre-service participants. One pre-service teacher wrote, "Last night's class was the best! Thank you so much for asking the vets (practicing teachers) to come to our class. I am so excited about entering the teaching profession. Do you think the teacher who was the lead teacher in my group would let me volunteer in her classroom?"

Throughout this study, the interactions between the pre-service participants and practicing teachers provided many "teachable moments." Theoretical information presented in class was quickly connected to specific classroom examples provided by the practicing teachers. For some participants, the interactions have become mentoring relationships that continues to this day.

Researcher Bias

The researchers were participant observers who taught their respective classes and interacted with the participants on a weekly basis. These researchers were positively biased and eager for "real world" teaching information to be shared with pre-service teachers and critiqued by practicing teachers. Additionally, the researchers assumed that a positive interaction between some members of the two groups would occur.

Implications

This study provided evidence of the need for pre-service teachers to interact with practicing teachers (Alvy, 2005; McElroy, 2005; Trubowitz, 2004). The study provided pre-service and practicing teachers with realistic experiences involving pedagogical knowledge, instructional skills, and positive attitudes. This interaction brought real-world application to classroom theory. The pre-service teachers received pragmatic perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers while the veteran teachers received affirmation that they were highly qualified professionals.

Implications from this study suggest that more interaction needs to occur between pre-service candidates and veteran teachers. While many teacher education programs include practica experiences, one-on-one interactions between pre-service candidates and veteran teachers are limited. The interactions occurring between and among the participants in this study prove that when given the opportunity a positive mentoring relationship can develop. It is essential for teacher education faculty to provide non-threatening opportunities for students and experienced teachers to interact. These interactions and subsequent relationships can only result in positive changes in our educational communities.

Contributions

Specific contributions from this study to teacher education practices and the educational community were identified. First, this study revealed the need for novice teacher education candidates to interact with veteran teachers. While mentoring programs are preferred by many, small meaningful interactions with highly qualified teachers also benefit pre-service teachers and provide many "teachable moments."

Secondly, this study provides evidence that collaborative activities among teacher education faculty benefited this educational community. This study and subsequent interactions occurring between participants would not have occurred without the collaborative efforts of the instructors. Educators at all levels benefit from collaborative activities.

Finally, this study serves as an impetus for further research regarding investigations into the mentoring process from teacher education candidate and supervising teacher perspectives. The interactions between these two groups could result in a changing paradigm for our educational community.

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