

Reflective Teaching in the Early Years: A Case for Mentoring Diverse Educators

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Student diversity in classrooms is on the rise and with it, a need for teachers who recognize the needs of diverse student populations. Teacher retention is a national crisis, with teachers of color at especially high risk for leaving the teaching profession early. This case study describes a collaborative mentoring approach used by a primary grades Latina teacher and two university professors. This approach focused on reflective discussion of classroom events and addressed the challenges of teaching for understanding in an age of accountability and changing demographics. Findings indicate that the beginning teacher's enthusiasm combined with the expertise of teacher educators benefited the teacher, the students, other teachers in the school, and the participating university professors. Implications of this case study point towards the need to mentor diverse educators in the early years.

KEY WORDS: Mentoring; diversity; minority populations; teaching; standards; collaboration; primary grades; beginning teacher; teacher educators; case study.

INTRODUCTION

Student diversity in classrooms is on the rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005b; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) and with it a need for teachers who recognize and appreciate the needs of diverse student populations. Efforts toward meeting the needs for such teachers have focused on recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds, but evidence on teacher recruitment and retention points to the need to shift focus to the retention of teachers instead of recruitment (Ingersoll, 2002; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). Specifically, teachers of color are at risk for leaving the teaching profession early (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003), a documented fact that

needs to be given critical attention if education is to reflect the needs of the student population in the United States.

Mentoring can be of the utmost importance in retaining minority teachers and reversing the trend of early resignations among minority teachers (Udelhofen & Larson, 2003). While there is no single mentoring model for everyone (Bleach, 1999), approaches to induction have begun to show the potential of collaborative mentoring (Carver, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). This case study examines a mentoring approach to support teachers serving diverse students. It describes the process of collaborative inquiry between a multilingual immigrant teacher and university professors, addressing the challenges of teaching for understanding in an age of accountability and changing demographics.

THE NEED FOR DIVERSE TEACHERS

Both learning theories and factual evidence point to the important link between minority student educational challenges and a lack of minority teachers in the public school system. The increasing diversity of classrooms and the lack of diversity among teachers

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is a disparity that cannot be afforded (Gay & Howard, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002). Nationally, White teachers comprise approximately 80% of all teachers while minority students comprise approximately 40% of students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005b; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). Black and Hispanic students consistently perform lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics and reading assessments compared to White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005a). This poor performance may be explained as a result of a significant divide between the life experiences of mainly White middle-class teachers and the students of ethnically diverse backgrounds, many of whom speak a first language that is not English and a disproportionate number of whom live in poverty (Gay & Howard, 2000; Irvine, 1997). Teachers often have difficulty delivering a curriculum and exhibiting interactional patterns that are culturally responsive (Irvine, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As Cochran-Smith suggested, the result of this is that the students in greatest academic need are "least likely to have access to educational opportunities congruent with their life experiences" (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 4).

Teachers' limited knowledge of the cultural communities of their students often results in teachers approaching minority students from a deficit perspective and places barriers to their development of close relationships with minority students (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). This may be especially problematic given that effective learning is dependent on social mediation on the part of the teacher and contextual appropriateness for the student (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs in the context of social interactions, with the learner engaging in culturally meaningful activities, with a more competent other who is responsive to the need for assistance. In order for teachers to scaffold, they must provide a foundation from which a student can develop skills (Tharp & Gallimore, 1989). This foundation involves a teacher's ability to make meaningful connections between what is being taught and what the child already knows, including social and cultural background. Research suggests that student motivation, task engagement, and learning are influenced by how teachers interact with students, how they encourage participation, and how they acknowledge the students' needs, interests, concerns, and preferences, further providing support for a need for more teachers from diverse backgrounds who can

make learning culturally relevant for students from diverse backgrounds (Chang-Wells, Gen Ling & Wells, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999).

The goal of teaching to a diverse student population should be to provide a bridge between home and school life and knowledge. These issues highlight the need for a questioning of how to change the make up of the nation's teachers and how to educate and prepare teachers to work in today's classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

THE NEED TO RETAIN EDUCATORS

The general response to the national teacher shortage has been for teacher educators to focus on recruiting. However, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future report (NCTAF) (2003) has identified retention as a "national crisis" (p. 21). The report provided evidence that the teacher shortage was due to early attrition as opposed to a low number of people entering teacher training and that the retention problem was most severe in schools with large numbers of poor and minority students (Cochran-Smith, 2006). Nearly half of all teachers abandon the teaching profession by the end of their first five years (Ingersoll, 2002). Research has pointed to several reasons why teachers leave, including dissatisfaction with their jobs due to low pay, lack of support, and limited decision-making power (Ingersoll, 2003). Such attrition comes at a high cost to teacher education programs, school communities, and student achievement. As such, teacher education programs should prepare teachers to work with minority students and can address the problem of minority teacher retention by incorporating perspectives of teachers from diverse backgrounds into the curriculum (Villegas & Lucas, 2004). This might also decrease the isolation and alienation often experienced by minority teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2004).

COLLABORATIVE MENTORING AND REFLECTIVE TEACHING

The importance of teacher mentor programs for teacher training and retention programs has been documented (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). A variety of mentoring philosophies and strategies exist. One such method is the collaborative approach, in which mentors and new teachers act as equal partners (Glickman, 1990) and democratic pedagogy is employed (Freire, 1970).

Using this collaborative approach, two university professors joined a Latina beginning teacher to collaborate in action research that addressed the challenges of race, culture, mathematics teaching, lack of resources, and accountability in a first grade classroom. The school involved had a free and/or reduced lunch rate of about 70%, and its student population was comprised of 58% African Americans, 25% Caucasians, 12% Latinos, and 5% Asians. The classroom of the beginning teacher was more diverse than the other classrooms in the grade, having 60% African Americans, 25% Latinos, 10% Caucasians, and 5% Asians. Eighty percent of the students in this specific classroom received free and/or reduced lunch. In addition, 20% of the students were receiving special education services and 15% were classified as gifted. The mentoring group members included teachers of color and were variously experienced at working with children for whom English is not the native language. The unique element of this group's mentoring focus was that the beginning teacher kept a journal of her experiences in the classroom, and the group used this journal to inductively determine future trajectories of the focal teacher's teaching decisions.

Collaborative action research aims to create social change, is frequently community-based, and is carried out by practitioners in the field (Stringer, 1996). The mentoring group's tenets were based on collaboration, reflective practice, shared vision for professional growth, and student learning. During the first semester of the 2001–2002 academic year, the group met every week in the beginning teacher's classroom. The composition of the group varied as the semester progressed but most frequently comprised two university professors of teacher education. A school-assigned mentor who was an experienced primary grades teacher also came to some meetings. During the second semester, meetings were called by the beginning teacher on a need basis as she transitioned from guided to independent practice. During the semester, other first-year teachers increasingly came to meetings as the beginning teacher shared her enthusiasm for teaching specific subjects and how she was addressing accountability by focusing her instruction on national and state curriculum goals and standards while also making learning relevant for her students. The following year, the group met to discuss and reflect on what had been learned from their experiences.

The group documented its work in multiple ways. To promote reflective teaching, the beginning

teacher kept a research diary/journal (Hughes, 1996), and the university faculty mentors took field notes from meetings. The group examined student work and relevant documents including benchmarks, school district textbooks, and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards. The research diary and field notes reflect perceptions about the mentoring situation, the classroom, student diversity, teaching mathematics, and accountability. Excerpts from the beginning teacher's journal were discussed during the meeting, and problems (questions) were posed. This was a key resource, and it is now recommended as part of mentoring programs (Udelhofen & Larson, 2003). It was used as a way to focus on the critical aspects of teaching.

Beginning teachers benefit from help in addressing curriculum standards and assessment, as well as alternate, culturally-relevant methods to meet the needs of diverse student populations (Villani, 2002). Under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (U. S. Department of Education, 2005) standardized tests have focused on reading, language arts, and mathematics.

THEMES

Several themes were identified by the group throughout the year. It was through the journal that mathematics teaching was identified as an area needing more professional development as students did not understand concepts. Many of these concepts are illustrated by representative journal excerpts that were written by the beginning teacher.

The focal teacher reported that the school district pacing guide did not reflect the variety in level of ability and previous experience with mathematics that the students in her classroom had. It focused on standardizing the curriculum rather than differentiating it for a variety of student capabilities. According to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) the lack of adequate mathematics education programs is partly due to the neglect of children's potential (Alvino, 1985). Assistance in developing subject-related teaching skills is a practical concern of beginning teachers (Bleach, 1999). As mathematics is the area needing most improvement, and presents a big gap between the scores of the majority and those in the minority, the focus of this group was on mathematics teaching that was culturally relevant, employing the students' background knowledge and experience (Boaler, 1993).

The group grappled with *how* to make mathematics relevant to students' lives and cultural backgrounds in such an environment as represented by the teacher's journal excerpt below:

I am not very good in math. I never was. We talked about making math relevant...but what is relevant? How do I make math relevant if it never was for me? Do you mean putting their names in the word problems or what?

The group members offered the beginning teacher concrete resources that were lacking in the school such as curriculum materials, manipulatives, and books. The mentors shared books on teaching specific mathematics concepts and the use of children's books to make math relevant to diverse populations. As a group, student learning was at the center of their practice (Udelhofen & Larson, 2003).

The beginning teacher's success was reflected in her students' increasing abilities in math. The students' enthusiasm for math was seen as they started finding math everywhere and recognizing that they used it every day—on the playground as they estimated how many steps it would take to get somewhere, or in the cafeteria as they bought ice cream. This is reflected by the journal entry below:

In the beginning I thought it would be impossible to teach math, not put zeros in decimals, set up algorithms differently...I don't know. I think I was so caught up on form that I could hardly focus on content, on how math can be useful, how kids can use it everyday. As I figured out how to value math and link it to kids' lives, I started seeing them do better in math. They started seeing math in everyday places. Like, when they went to the cafeteria to buy ice cream, they knew that they used math, or if they were playing a board game and had to count points, or even if they were playing with blocks. They could even see math in the playground. I started learning with them. In a way, we talked about math all the time!

They started seeing math in everyday life and began to perform well on standardized tests. Students ultimately scored above the median score for the school, district, and state on the SAT-9 test, even though the incidence of poverty was higher in that specific classroom compared to the classrooms of more experienced teachers.

Learning the culture of a school and becoming socialized into the teaching profession is an important step for beginning teachers (Johnson, 2004). Learning who dictates daily operations, what other teachers do, and how beginning teachers are treated

was a major focus of helping the beginning teacher transition into the teaching profession. The focal teacher's assessment of the disparity between the standards and the reality was met with resistance from her teaching colleagues and as a result, she experienced a lack of support from other teachers. She described one of these situations in the journal excerpt below:

When our grade team met with the curriculum person for the district, she explained that we had to be on page x on day y. We could not move ahead. We could not fall behind. Every first grade in the county was to be on the same page at the same exact time. When I asked what happened when kids didn't understand, she said that we could not hold the whole class because of a few. As we left and walked back to our grade level pod, I said that I could not understand what she was saying. The team leader immediately volunteered that English was a hard language and if there was something that I didn't understand, she could explain it to me. It wasn't the language I had difficulty understanding. It was the idea that every first grade must be on the same page and that every child learned the same way! I just could NOT understand that!!!

In addition to meetings led by district people, team meetings for teachers of all classes in her grade were led by experienced teachers. Whose voice was heard was dependent on the amount of time each teacher had spent in the school. With this teacher, it was clear that many of her questions were ignored as her teammates interpreted them as being a matter of linguistic competence and not a matter of thinking critically about students' learning experiences. The beginning teacher felt discouraged to serve her students in the manner in which she felt would be most successful.

As the mentoring collaborative group engaged in the critical analysis of this teacher's experiences, the group dialogued and engaged in problem solving for teaching mathematics for understanding. She was encouraged to remain true to her beliefs about education while maintaining state standards.

I don't know what I would do if it wasn't for this group of wonderful people supporting me. It would be so easy to trash what I believe in...to start believing in these pacing guides as the only option, the only way to teach...but it wouldn't be fair to the kids! But with the help of these professors, I can make learning meaningful to the kids! I can meet and even exceed the standards without having to bore them to death!!!

As a result of the mentoring group discussions and reflections in her journal, the focal teacher was

able to make data-based decisions about teaching and felt better able to stand her ground when defending her methods to other teachers.

I started taking notes of what I noticed in the classroom. Then I reread and tried to understand what those behaviors meant. Sometimes I took it to the group. This happened a lot in the beginning. As time went by, I could make decisions by myself. The observations determined what I did in the classroom. I started focusing on the kids more. As I changed my way of teaching, I decided to post the standards being addressed each week by my door. I knew other teachers were talking and I wanted them to know that there were many ways to meet the standards without having to torture students with information that made no sense to them! What I was doing was valid and my support angels helped me make sense of it!

The focal teacher's mentor in the school also began to implement several of her reflection-driven changes in teaching, a change that the beginning teacher credits as a major turning point in validating her teaching skills and in helping other teachers view her classroom techniques more positively. Also, during the semester, other first-year teachers came to meetings. This occurred as the beginning teacher shared her enthusiasm for teaching mathematics and how she was addressing accountability by focusing her instruction on the state curriculum goals, and NCTM standards while also making learning relevant for her students. As a result of her increasing feeling of efficacy, she began to call mentoring group meetings on a need-only basis.

In addition to affecting a change for the focal teacher, the mentoring group affected a change for the mentoring university faculty as well. They reported becoming more aware of and in touch with the presenting issues of beginning teachers in diverse classrooms.

I cannot believe how this has been helpful to me! I could hardly believe my ears when Drs. X and Y said that they had learned so much from this experience! They even said that this has influenced their research and teaching. I am glad they took something from it because for a while I thought that I was the only one benefiting from these meetings!

As a result, they engaged in reflective processes for making more effective links between university teacher education programs and the first year of teaching. These focused on incorporating issues of meeting the demands that arrive with this era of accountability and issues of color that permeated dialogues in their university teacher education curricula.

More generally, this model also provides further supporting evidence for previous studies that have suggested that similarities in philosophies, viewpoints, and backgrounds among mentors and protégés promote teacher induction (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Tillman, 2000). The beginning teacher reported that having the support from another educator of color as well as a professor with experience in teaching ESOL and teacher development allowed her to feel like a valuable member of the teaching community.

CONCLUSION

With reflection, all involved in the collaborative mentoring team grew from this experience. The enthusiasm of a beginning teacher was combined with the expertise of teacher educators and specifically developed for a particular context and the benefit of students (Middleton, 2000). The group engaged in collaborative action research combined with the tenets of Freire's democratic pedagogy: problem-posing, dialogue, and problem-solving (Freire, 1959). Such a collaborative model for mentoring does not occur unless it is based on mutual respect and learning (Udelhofen & Larson, 2003). The group formed a community of learners and moved beyond the hierarchies of power present in many mentoring models. Collaborative mentoring, in this experience, was highly successful for the new teacher and professionally rewarding for the university faculty (Podsen & Denmark, 2000).

This study is particularly relevant to teacher educators, as it addresses strategies for mentoring teachers of color who are more vulnerable and held to higher standards in high poverty schools, which have fewer resources. The best practices for the particular context and students developed as a process of problem posing, dialogue and problem solving. Solutions were implemented in the classroom and all in the group learned together. This mentoring model can influence teaching, encouraging new teachers to learn from their students and continuously engage in action research as problems are identified within the classroom.

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