

Chapter 4

How Pre-Service and First-Year Teachers Utilize Informal Learning in a Work Context

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service candidates enroll in teacher preparation programs to learn the knowledge, skills, and abilities that teachers must possess. Throughout their education program, they apply their classroom learning to clinical experiences, those experiences that pre-service candidates have with K-12 students. These clinical experiences provide a hands-on approach to what the day-to-day mechanics will be once they become a teacher of record. Succeeding graduation and receiving a teaching degree, pre-service candidates still have more to learn as they make the transition from pre-service candidate to a novice teacher. This chapter focuses on the informal learning that pre-service candidates and novice teachers receive when they conduct student teaching and become a teacher of record. Background knowledge of the trajectory of learning starting with teacher education programs and ending with the first years of teaching is provided along with issues, controversies, and problems that affect pre-service candidates and novice teachers' competencies to fulfill the duties of teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on the preparation of K-12 teachers is one that has a vast number of opinions of what should be done and what the best approach should be. Across the teacher education programs both within the United States and other countries you will find several pathways in which teachers can be prepared for the classroom. There are traditional routes in which candidates pursue an undergraduate degree in education or are awarded a master's degree in education after receiving a bachelor's degree in a specific content area. There are non-traditional routes such as Teach for America, and other alternative certifica-

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tion routes. In addition to the program that any teacher has graduated from, the variety of experiences they encounter in their first year of teaching may increase their level of competency in the classroom. In fact it has been found that if K-12 schools provide additional support for these teachers that practice is improved and these new teachers can connect the theory they have learned with practice. It allows for them to further understand the complexity of teaching in “real-life” (Standbury & Zimmerman, 2000).

Teacher education programs are somewhat limited in the knowledge, skills and abilities that they can provide their pre-service candidates. The mere variation of teacher preparation programs overall presents how very different pre-service candidate experiences are. For example, in Canada pre-service candidates are required to complete a four-year program that yields a B.A. degree and may be followed by an additional two years that then leads to a B.Ed.. Whereas some teacher preparation programs might be two years in length with a curricula packed with content specific information, pedagogical information and lastly a brief internship, 10-15 weeks for two semesters, in a classroom before they become teachers of record. Lastly, in the United States there are always alternative routes to certification to become a teacher. These individuals are often in the classroom from the very first day in the program and they complete the program while currently teaching in the classroom with no additional support.

Teacher educators, most of them also graduates from these varied programs are equipped with a variety of knowledge and experiences that add to the conglomeration of knowledge and skills taught in teacher education programs. Each educator utilizes that unique background knowledge and experiences she has to educate pre-service candidates, therefore instruction may appear differently from program to program, course to course, and classroom to classroom. Teacher educators who have previous experience with teaching in schools but have transitioned to higher education, may be unfamiliar with current teaching models, school and classroom climate change, and student behavior simply due to the fact they have been out of the K-12 classroom for too long. Stansbury and Zimmerman (2000) even indicate that even with teachers who are in the classroom that updating old skills and unlearning habits is a necessity but difficult for veteran teachers. Therefore teacher educators cannot fully prepare candidates for every experience they may encounter during their matriculation in a teacher preparation program.

Even after a candidate has successfully completed a teacher education program, the learning trajectory will continue. It seems that the majority of a teacher’s life-long learning still happens on the job informally, within the schools, within the classrooms and between their peers and mentors. It has been said several times over that the field of education is the profession that “eats its young” (Halford, 1998, p. 33).

This chapter explores the experiences of pre-service candidates and first year teachers from an early childhood and middle childhood standpoint. While their preparation provides them some tools to find success in the classroom much of what they learn happens informally. These teachers learn how to be effective by trial and error, by observing and through conversations. It is in the informal way that these teachers ultimately learned how to do their jobs. Jeffs and Smith (2012) indicate that informal learning or education is something that works through conversation and the exploration and enlargement of one’s experience. In this chapter we focus on how teachers’ informal learning take place in their classrooms and school context. What did they feel completely unprepared for after being in their own classroom with no support? We present teachers’ voices regarding their experiences and the impact of formal education and informal learning on their experiences in real life teaching contexts. The methodology for gathering these data was mixed. Current students were surveyed while informal interviews were held with graduates of the authors’ teacher education programme. As these experiences are highlighted, this information can be an asset to teacher educators who prepare pre-service candidates for their careers in the classroom. Prior research has indicated that first year teachers who have been fully exposed to what their job duties

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