

Chapter 26

Mentoring and Lived Experiences of Beginning Teachers in a Resident Teacher Program

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ABSTRACT

There has been considerable attention and focus, in the field of education, on development support for beginning teachers. The resident teacher program or a teacher residency is a comprehensive means of providing beginning teachers with support. This initiative is usually organized through the concerted efforts of a college of education and school district. Within this study, attention is given to the potential or real benefits and to the successes and challenges of an existing resident teacher program with six beginning teachers enrolled in an elementary education resident teacher program. The outcome shows that resident teachers' experiences is characterized by double commitment with a lot of responsibilities but double support; ability to bring what's learned in graduate courses into classroom teaching; and confidence to transition into regular classroom teaching after the program.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning teachers' experiences have received considerable attention in educational literature (Jensen, Sandoval-Hernández, Knoll & Gonzalez, 2012; Ball, Knobloch, & Hoop, 2007; Romano & Gibson, 2006). Educational researchers and others in education have shown interest in the induction, mentoring support, and guidance that beginning teachers need to experience to ensure successful entry years and retention in the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The resident teacher program or teacher residency

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is a comprehensive program of teacher development and support for beginning teachers in schools. It is a mutual collaboration between school districts and colleges of education in universities (Solomon, 2009), and has received considerable attention both in theory and practice, due to its huge potential.

The attention in the literature has centered on the programs perceived impact, (Berry, Montgomery, Curtis, Hernandez, Wurtzel, & Snyder, 2008) the success or impact on success, and the challenges of the program (Sawchuk, 2009). Attention has also focused on universities and school districts, which have embraced resident teacher programs, the core principles that guide effective establishment and organization of the programs, (Solomon, 2009; Berry et al., 2008) and funding for the programs (Sawchuk, 2009). However, a missing link or vacuum in the discussion and literature about resident teacher programs has been the lived experiences of beginning teachers, who are the main recipients of this program of intervention. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of beginning teachers regarding their experiences in a resident teacher program. Gathering, describing, and interpreting the “conscious experience” (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011, p. 52) of beginning teachers in a resident teaching program and how they experience it, provided a perspectives on what it is like or what it means to be a teacher, in the beginning year of teaching.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Kolb’s theory of experiential learning focuses primarily on the dynamic relationship existing among learning, work, life activities, and the construction of knowledge and understanding in the context of education (Kolb, 1984). That is, it is an all-inclusive paradigm of learning, which encompasses experience, perception, cognition, and resultant behavioral changes (Kolb, 1984). The theory of experiential learning originated from models of learning by theories of Lewin and Dewey. These theories, which emphasized learning as a dialectic process involving experiences, observations, concepts, and actions also offered common ideas relevant to beginning teachers’ experience, learning, and growth.

Lewin’s model views learning as a cycle with four stages, starting with one’s current/immediate experience serving as reason for observation and reflection as the second stage. This is followed by construction of concepts and generalizations and their application in different situation to see how it fits (Kolb, 1984). This model was relevant to the experiences of beginning teachers since immediate personal experience serves as the focal point for learning, giving life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process. When human beings share an experience, they can share it fully, concretely, and abstractly (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). Another aspect of Lewin’s model, which was important for this study on beginning teacher experiences and learning, was the premium it placed on feedback as a learning tool. Lewin considers feedback as useful for social learning and for the problem-solving process.

These characteristics are relevant to the experiences and learning of beginning teachers because these involve a continuous process that continues after college education. It is also grounded in experience, which makes student teaching and developmental support like mentoring, induction, and resident teacher programs even more relevant.

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