

Chapter 30

Transformational Learning Theory and Service– Learning Projects: Impact on Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of Teaching In–Risk Youth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the University of Windsor’s service-learning program Leadership Experience for Academic Direction’s (L.E.A.D.) impact on teacher candidates’ perceptions of teaching in-risk students. The L.E.A.D. program focuses on introducing teacher candidates to the Ministry of Ontario’s Student Success initiatives and reflective teaching practices, and places teacher candidates with Student Success Teachers, allowing teacher candidates to learn from in-risk youth. This study adopted a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experience of graduates of the L.E.A.D. program. Five graduates of the L.E.A.D. program who are currently practicing secondary teachers in southwestern Ontario were interviewed in one focus group and one individual interview. The responses indicated themes of the importance of relationship building with students, the value of school support systems, the positive impact of L.E.A.D. coursework, and altered efficacy and perceptions of teaching in-risk youth.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, service-learning has become part of many teacher education programs across North America and the United Kingdom as studies have shown that service-learning programs fill the gap between educational theory and real-world classroom experience (Anderson et al., 2001). In Iverson and James’ (2009) study, the authors define service-learning as a reciprocal learning process where teacher

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candidates gain new skills and attitudes by providing a service of some kind to students or through a community program. Service-Learning is an education trend that is transcending all levels of education. Elementary students are learning through community projects, high school students are learning about potential careers through cooperative education, and university and professional program students are practicing their skills in paid and unpaid internships. However, many Faculty of Educations have not implemented mandatory service-learning projects as the assessment of the projects is often subjective and not as easily objectively evaluated as alternate and traditional methods of assessment (Swick et al. 1998).

Several service-learning programs at the University of Windsor's Faculty of Education involve teacher candidates working with students as a way for candidates to develop greater cultural competency and empathy. (Dweck, 2008) I argue that teacher candidates' experiences in the teacher education program are important to consider as teachers' attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions are often shaped during their program (Lund, D. E., & Lee, L., 2015). The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of the Leadership Experience for Academic Direction (L.E.A.D.) service-learning project on teacher candidates' perceptions of teaching youth who are considered in-risk (Dweck, 2008).

BACKGROUND

Interpretive Framework: Transformational Learning Theory

Throughout this study, the researchers will be investigating the research problem through the lens of the Transformational Learning Theory. Transformational Learning Theory is an adult education learning theory established by Jack Mezirow (1975) in the late twentieth century. Mezirow believed that when people faced challenging situations and participated in critical self-reflecting, their dysfunctional worldviews were often altered (Merriam, 2004). Transformational Learning Theory is used to understand significant and impactful learning that changes the learner in profound and long-lasting ways (Jones, 2009). Mezirow supposed that people have Meaning Perspectives, which affect the way people understand the world around them. They are based on upbringing, experiences, and taken-for-granted ways of seeing ourselves in the world. The individual is rarely fully conscience of their Existing Meaning Schemes but instead believes their beliefs are just the way things are. When people experience new things, they filter this new knowledge through those perspectives, adding to their way of seeing the world (Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow believed that the Meaning Perspectives could be sub-categorized into three Existing Meaning schemes; psychological, sociolinguistic, and epistemic. Psychological pertains to how we see ourselves and the things we are capable of doing. Sociolinguistic or sociocultural is what we believe about society and how it is organized, including matters of race, gender, and class. Finally, epistemic is our beliefs about knowledge, about what knowledge is, and how it is made (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformational learning experiences happen when new knowledge does not fit into one's existing meaning perspective. Therefore, forcing the learner outside of their comfort zone to gain new or altered understandings. Mezirow (2003) believed that transformations often followed a ten-phase process when experiencing transformational learning. First, when one encounters new knowledge that does not fit into their Meaning Perspectives, they face a Disorientating Dilemma (Mezirow, 2000). Second, the individual begins self-examination that stems from an uneasy, and at times frightening, new thoughts that come from re-examining one's previously held worldviews that felt very certain at one time (Jones, 2009). Third, a critical assessment of one's assumptions allows the individual to self-evaluate their underlying funda-

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