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Holly Klock
hae5002@psu.edu

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Bridging Transformation in a PDS Preservice Teacher Education Program

Holly Klock

The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: This empirical work explores Transformational Learning within preservice teacher education. Preservice teacher identified disorientation is essential when learning through this constructive-development perspective.

Keywords: transformation, epistemology, preservice teacher education, program design

Context

This research explores the perception of critical incidents, as identified by six preservice teachers (PST) in one university's Professional Development School (PDS). Participants in this research are senior year undergraduate students placed in a year-long student teaching internship in grades K-4. During this internship, PSTs abandon the university calendar and follow the district calendar for the entire school year. Over the course of two semesters, PSTs simultaneously complete four methods courses and clinical placement hours.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1996) frames learning through a constructive-developmental perspective (Kegan, 2000). Critical experiences lead to the investigation of one's epistemological foundations. Ways of knowing are then construed and revised, ultimately leading to a change in one's future actions. Included in the analysis of PST identified disorienting dilemmas within this research, are the core elements of experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse and action. This theory serves as a lens of study as PSTs navigate the development of their own teaching beliefs within the PDS program.

Berger, explicitly states the use of theory and data in the context of her 2004 study are to "begin to map the terrain of transformation, particularly the threshold of transformation" (p. 336). Berger (2004), also argues for the need to map the terrain of transformation in order for instructors to better support students through this process. Thus, this research aims to address this concern, as it investigates critical incidents in the PDS, as identified by PSTs.

Background & Purpose

Somewhere, within this full-year student teaching practicum, an underlying assumption about learning to become a teacher takes place. It is presumed that PSTs seamlessly navigate the transformation of their own epistemologies. However, without purposefully designing bridges for these transformations to take place, their constructive-development may be delayed (Dirx, 2012). Within the totality of coursework leading up to this field experience, the undergraduate student often passively receives an extension of knowledge held by instructors (Freire, 1974). Suddenly, when these undergraduate student teachers begin their field experience, they encounter various ways of knowing. Kegan (2000) refers to this shift as one in which an individual must begin to shape coherent meaning "out of the raw material of our outer and inner experiencing" (p. 38). If the phenomenology of this epistemological shift is unknown to teacher educators, in what ways might our program ultimately hinder experiences in which PSTs reframe their assumptions about teaching? Two research questions guided this work. (1) In what ways do PSTs identify disorienting dilemmas within their Professional Development School experience? (2) In what ways do the identified experiences impact their knowledge of teaching?

Discussion

Based on participant interviews, a continuum of epistemological assumptions PSTs experience when involved in a year-long student teaching program became clear. PSTs enter into their cooperating classroom with the assumption that cooperating teachers hold the knowledge of how to educate young children. Eventually, PSTs begin to develop and refine their own teaching beliefs through an apprenticeship of observation (Grossman, 1991). Critical experiences then push PSTs towards a transformation, after they critically reflect, engage in discourse, and act. This action is what solidifies a shift in their epistemology as they realize that they hold knowledge for how to educate K-4 children. However, without opportunities for experiencing critical incidents, this epistemological transformation is stunted.

The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to explore the role of transformational learning theory within the context of preservice-teacher education. Discussion will focus on the development of preservice-teacher education programs designed with the navigation of epistemological assumptions in mind.

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