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Affirming Consciousness within Learning Communities

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A component of the Academy for Teacher Excellence is the Teacher Academy Induction Learning Community (TAILC), University of Texas at San Antonio, which provides induction for novice teachers working in high-need areas such as mathematics, science, bilingual, and special education with Bilingual Learners (BLs). A specific goal of TAILC is to assign mentors to scaffold teacher candidate-novice learning and development, while also reducing isolation, within a community of practice. In this chapter, we share the induction component, which supports teacher candidates commencing their final year of study and continues during their novice years of teaching. Using Vygotsky's (1978) theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners/apprentices are guided by experts as knowledgeable others; we maintain that candidate-novices can benefit from these social interactions. In this chapter, we focus on novice-mentor dyads.

Theoretical Framework

The novice-mentor's relationship, when viewed as a learning-teaching process, is by nature, situational and contextual; and, as such requires mentors to mediate instruction within the ZPD. This sociocultural perspective suggests that novices' actions in learning-to-teach is grounded in social interactions and nurtured through membership in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Many consider induction support critical to teachers' professional development. López, Lash, Shields, and Wagner (2004) explored the effects of induction on retention and student achievement. Research shows that effective induction includes: mentors who model best practices; positive mentor-novice relationships; presence of supportive, collegial work environments; quality, structured mentoring; common planning time with mentor; and participation in learning communities (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, & Yusko, 1999; Whisnant, Elliot, & Pynchon, 2005). Participation in learning communities of practice provides opportunity for novices to explore personal, ethnic, and teacher identity; examine assumptions regarding students' ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds; acknowledge pedagogical epistemologies; and help teachers make connections between theory and practice. This communal reflection and dialogue encourages novices to identify with and advocate for

their students (Moll & Arnot-Hopffner, 2005; Flores, 2001; Wood & Bennett, 2000).

Torres-Guzmán (1997) adds that bilingual education mentees and mentors should share a common language and ideology because mentors help novices evaluate the sociocultural schooling context. This analysis encourages novices to view communities as rich sources of knowledge with assets worth documenting and sharing. Other work suggests that induction support for bilingual education teachers must include personal development strands, such as exploration of identity, ethnic consciousness, efficacy, and belief systems (Clark & Flores, in press; see Chapters 3 and 4). The case study in this chapter uses a sociocultural theoretical framework defining induction as a support system where mentors, as knowledgeable others, guide novices through their ZPD within a community of practice.

TAILC Induction Case Study

Data sources for this qualitative study were surveys, interviews, and observations. We surmised that effective induction support assists novices as they transition from a teacher preparation program to a learning community of practice. Participants included novices (69), in their first-year teaching culturally, linguistically diverse students and six mentors. The mentors as a group averaged 20 years of teaching experience. Specifically, two were doctoral students in bilingual education; two had masters in math or science, and two had doctorates in education.

Our finding showed that novices felt challenged and overwhelmed in their first-year. They questioned their competency and doubted the effectiveness of their university preparation. Typical comments were: "No one told me it was going to be like this!" or "The professors painted a perfect picture". We also observed that transition from candidate to teacher and understandings of theory to practice was not only difficult, but, developmental in nature. To guide novices through this frustrating period of questioning, disillusionment, and abandonment of goals, mentors promoted—*confianza*—a sense of mutual trust and caring (see Chapter 17). An immediate focus was to establish cooperative relationships rather than exhibit evaluative attitudes. Mentors provided a variety of services, such as explanation of curricular programs, discussions of pedagogical approaches, suggestions for classroom management techniques, and help with ways to access resources. We found specific induction components, which appeared to support and reaffirm novices' commitment to teaching BLs. These included: communiqués, conferencing, coaching, mentoring, and interactive learning experiences.

Communiqués

Novices and mentors used different ways to connect, such as conference meetings, e-mail, and telephone calls. Novices sought guidance and responses to their concerns. For example, John e-mailed his mentor:

> I need your advice on two situations. First, I have a student that refuses to do her work even when I work problems on the board she will not copy them. All

she does is talk. Do you have a form letter or any advice how to handle this? I want to do it right. Second, in sixth period two boys received verbal warnings for being disruptive. It's like pulling teeth to get them to do anything but talk.

Yet, others felt overwhelmed, frustrated, or were resistant. Olivia described a tenuous relationship: "I do appreciate everything you do. I want to apologize for my attitude and behavior. I need to get over being paranoid and nervous when you're in my classroom while I'm conducting a lesson. I know you are here to help me." However, once trust was established, venting about difficult or uncomfortable situations allowed novices to release stress and generate plausible solutions. A mentor stated: "They seek advice about challenges such as classroom management or ways to involve parents."

Conferencing

Individual conferences prior to and after classroom visits provided opportunity to discuss challenges or accomplishments. Using the *LIBRE* model (Guerra, 2005), allowed novice–mentor dyads to engage in problem-solving activities through active listening and reciprocal conversations. Novices also found unscheduled face-to-face meetings and telephone conferences helpful.

Coaching

This approach promoted development and allowed novices to showcase newly acquired skills. Mentors were able to show novices how to create classroom conditions to improve BLs' learning opportunities and demonstrate specific teaching strategies. Coaching with relevant feedback supported growth in a non-threatening context. A mentor reflected:

> Mr. N. rearranged seats for better classroom management. He's trying to determine which groupings minimize disruptions. This lesson was more engaging than the previous one. I recommended that students draw or cut pictures of organisms to create the food chain rather then just use word lists. He did less lecturing and more hands-on group activities.

Mentoring

Our findings showed that mentor support was needed during the first year. Trusting, non-judgmental relationships between mentee and mentor encouraged novices to question school policies and procedures or request assistance without fear of reprisal. Often fear of being perceived as incompetent or even disrespectful limited open-dialogue with and assistance from school supervisors. Novices preferred to share their concerns with mentors. This support reduced anxiety and enhanced feelings of self-efficacy.

Interactive Learning Experiences

Additionally, novices and mentors participated in multiple interactive learning experiences through workshops, seminars, and institutes delivered by master

teachers, Academy for Teacher Excellence (ATE) staff, professors, and consultants. Participants found these sessions meaningful as well as relevant since topics were identified by the mentors and novices.

In sum, our findings confirmed that successful induction addressed the academic, personal, and professional needs of novices. Participation in a learning community of practice promoted development and provided an open network for safe communication. A novice captures the value of induction: "I have nothing but gratitude for this program. It helped me get through my first two months."

Transforming Teacher Preparation

Given the critical shortages of teachers in bilingual, mathematics, science, and special education, preparation models must consider the inclusion of induction programs to insure successful transitions from university classrooms to public school settings. Mentoring supports novices' development and promotes sustainability in the field. We must recognize that novices continue to be learners and mentors can serve as experts within novices' zones of development. While preparation programs may address candidates' zone of proximal development, these experiences only approximate the realities that novices face in their classrooms working with BLs. Induction services must be an essential part of preparation programs. Based on this preliminary analysis, we contend that engaging novices through their zones of development, within a learning community with mentors may be the bridge that connects preparation and practice.

Research Directions

There is a need to examine the nature and the impact of induction as a support for novice teachers working with BLs. We suggest the following topics:

- Induction delivery: Comparison of innovative online interdisciplinary learning communities of practice with traditional face-to-face services.
- Impact of induction: Analyze and document how/if induction support affects teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes.
- Effects of mentor preparation: Examine the process of specific mentor professional development in areas such as cultural diversity, self-empowerment, identity development, and teacher resistance to change.

Acknowledgment

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Part V

Revolución

The solution is not to integrate them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves.

Paulo Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.*
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