

Beginning Teachers' Experiential Learning in the Era of Common Core: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative, single-case study described the professional learning experiences of a group of beginning teachers who participated in a California teacher induction program. The study contributes to an understanding of factors that form the foundation of professional learning as perceived by the participants. Furthermore, the study adds to extant literature on induction, including the transition period between pre-service and in-service phases, experiential learning throughout day-to-day events and action research undertaken during inquiry-based projects. The following themes emerged from the study: transition from pre-service to induction, context for teaching and learning, collaboration with peers, subtle shift from content standards to Common Core standards, questioning and ascertaining the merits of inquiry as professional development, learning by experimentation and from life experiences, current practice as the ultimate payoff, nurturing experiential learning, obstacles to induction, and managing the 21st century classroom. While beginning teachers perceived induction as one aspect of their professional learning, they deemed other factors, such as school climate, leadership, and bureaucracy as elements that could either advance or thwart their development.

Keywords: Professional learning, induction, inquiry, experiential learning, Common Core.

Beginning teachers' first round with their own classrooms, beyond student teaching, or their stab at an internship, fresh out of college, is rife with trepidation (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Quite often, their fears, during the first couple of years, revolve around the complex combination of classroom management issues, survival in the maze of education standards and the keys to obtaining tenure (Hong, 2010). With subject matter competence in hand, whether obtained by examination or college major specialization, most are

relatively confident in curriculum knowledge (Kereluik, Fahoe, & Terry, 2013). However, what quickly bubbles up to the surface is the political dynamics embedded in institutions and the need to exercise delicate diplomacy to cautiously navigate them in an era of shifting curricular, technological and instructional paradigms (Demski, 2013; Goodwin, 2012; Curry, Kim, Russell, Callahan, & Bacais, 2008).

To enable a practical transition from pre-service to professional practice, some states in America and other countries around the world offer induction to beginning teachers (Kearney, 2014; Bullough, 2012). In most induction programs, mentors are assigned to beginning teachers with whom they meet routinely for support, classroom observation feedback, and reflective conversations. These mentors can be the bedrock of teaching and learning or just another group in the circle of many with whom these novices interact, such as parents, administrators, and ancillary staff.

Moreover, beginning teachers must understand the tenets of teacher evaluation. With only two years in most public school systems to prove teacher effectiveness, every day is a continuum of the initial job interview, whereby they seek to demonstrate pedagogical skills and positive assessment results as the measure of their expertise (Feiman-Nemser, 2012a; Feiman-Nemser, 2012b). Beginning teachers' experiences with mentors and administrators run the gamut: these figures of support and authority, respectively, may perform lifesaver roles or leave beginning teachers to sink-or-swim (Ingersoll, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to present relevant findings on beginning teachers' experiences during the induction phase with mentors and administrators from a research case study on beginning teachers' professional learning as experiential learners during a school district's transition to Common Core standards (Dakwa, 2016). The research study set out to explore: What is the induction experience for beginning teach-

ers during the implementation of Common Core Standards in a California suburban high school district?

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory was used as a framework lens to view the problem of practice. The primary focus of the theory is a move away from the behaviorist method of learning, in which the learner passively absorbs knowledge, to an active stance, befitting the constructivist paradigm, in which the learner is intricately involved in the cognition of the learning experience (Kolb, 1984). The emphasis of the theory is not to pose a separate theory of acquiring knowledge but to offer experiential learning as "a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition and behavior" (Kolb, 194).

The central theme of the Kolbian theory is its characteristics that portray learning as a cyclical process (Kolb, 1984). These characteristics include: the conception of learning as a process, not an outcome; a continuous process grounded in experience; the necessity to resolve conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world; learning as a holistic process of adaptation to the world; and transaction as an element of learning between the person and the environment (Kolb, 1984). There are four modes in the cycle of learning: "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation" (Turesky & Gallagher, 2011, p. 6). Hansen (2012) ascribes specific interpretations to each mode: concrete experience – direct encounter with the experience; reflective observation – reflection and internalization of the experience; abstract conceptualization – creation of rules and strategies related to the experience, and active experimentation – application of strategies and rules related to the experience.

Review of Literature

As teacher candidates transition from pre-service to in-service practice, they sit on the threshold of self-directed learning (Snyder, 2012). Defined by Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), self-directed learning occurs when people engage in "planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences" (p. 110). Thus, instead of attending formal college lectures and participating in student teaching practicums, beginning teachers have to acclimate to professional training, usually delivered via workshops from which they – mostly independently – will need to decipher relevance to their instructional environments (Fletcher, 2012). In addition, beginning teachers routinely engage in informal learning, amassing and fil-

tering ideas, throughout their day-to-day interactions with colleagues whose professional experience varies from novice to veteran. Their ability to determine best practices is contingent on whether they can evaluate if these practices are beneficial in their individual settings (Clayton, 2007).

As beginning teachers acquire new strategies, implement them in the classrooms, and reflect on their success or failure, they develop new levels of schema in which the metacognitive process helps refine new approaches to their pedagogy (Snyder, 2012; Ball & Forzani, 2011). According to Snyder (2012), teaching and learning must be experienced in multiple formats on several occasions. She argues that teachers should experience teaching methods as teachers and as learners to understand the nuances that come with pedagogy.

Coupled with the knowledge that beginning teachers gain from learning on the job are the reflective practices that could be seamlessly integrated into their work (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). This notion suggests that it behooves professional development facilitators to carve out time for beginning teachers to engage in purposeful reflection (Feiman-Nemser, 2007). According to Merriam et al. (2007), one of its benefits is the ability to move backward and forward in complex situations that require sound judgments. The literature clearly notes that reflection can occur on action; that is, "thinking through a situation after it has happened" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 174) or in action; that is, suddenly becoming aware of a new understanding of a previously held notion (Schon, 1987). Both types of reflection are relevant to the beginning teachers' induction experience and readily occur when they engage in teacher inquiry or action research (Giles, Wilson & Elias, 2010). Since these activities take place in the context of the workplace, they form the basis of job-embedded professional development and conveniently fill the gap that teachers face from theory to practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2012b).

The Role of Induction Programs

Framed as "the transition from pre-service preparation to practice," induction, as posited by Feiman-Nemser (2001), "brings a shift in role orientation and an epistemological move from knowing about teaching through formal study to knowing how to teach by confronting the day-to-day challenges" (p. 1027). According to Fry (2007), the subject of effectiveness of induction programs is a growing area of research, but so far, there is limited information in the literature on whether or not induction programs are beneficial to teachers and truly impact student achievement. Fry's

(2007) contention is that they tend to be of mediocre quality, and there is lack of consistent monitoring by school leaders to support their improvement. She also argues that induction programs are inclined to lack differentiation, a necessary element for success.

Moreover, once the induction period is over, beginning teachers may still need continued support in the form of collaboration and authentic professional development for the challenges that will present themselves each year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In a longitudinal induction report, Smith et al. (2012) report that over the past few decades, the need for high teacher quality and retention have spurred the expansion of induction activities. Nevertheless, induction without the proper infrastructures may be self-defeating. Researchers also assert that, although beginning teachers face unique challenges during this initial phase, they are held responsible for demonstrating high quality content, while ensuring order and safety (Smith et al., 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Smith et al. (2012), "found that even when program supports for new teachers were intensive, frequent, and highly regarded, a poor school climate and weak leadership could undermine the [induction] program" (p. 225). In addition, if administrative support and leadership are lacking, the beginning teacher might not experience professional growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Breaux & Wong, 2003). Given these shortfalls, teacher educators and professional developers call for a sustained system of professional learning with job-embedded features that set the stage for lifelong learning and shifting paradigms (Drago-Severson, 2009; Zhao, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are documented benefits that accrue from induction. Although programs vary in duration of term and number of services, many offer teachers the opportunity to collaborate with a mentor for support, and in some cases, participate in action research as a component of formative assessment (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). According to University of California, Santa Cruz's New Teacher Center, "Today, 27 states require new teachers to participate in some form of induction or mentoring and, as a result, more new teachers receive mentoring or induction support than ever before" (Goldrick, Osta, Barlin, & Burn, 2012, p. iii). The center purports that beginning teachers need a strong transitional experience via a robust induction program, which seamlessly bridges pre-service to professional practice.

Methodology

A qualitative design (Creswell 2007) was employed to elicit and report on beginning teachers' experiences as expressed by their authentic points of view. The

selected methodology was case study. Yin (2014) purports that "case study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" that "allows investigators to focus on a 'case' and retain a holistic and real-world perspective..." (p. 4). Hence, a single case study was conducted within a secondary level, suburban school district in California in which participants originated from a pool of former beginning teachers who had completed the district's induction program during the implementation phase of Common Core standards. Drawing on Chein's (1981) and Patton's (1990) definition of *purposive* and *purposeful*, respectively, Merriam (1998) claims that "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight, and therefore, must select a sample from which most can be learned" (p. 61). Working from this definition, and Merriam's (1998) directive that criteria must be established, criterion-based, purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. Through an emailed recruitment letter, ten teachers consented to participate in the study, representing a cross-section of content areas: English language arts, math, science, special education, and world languages.

The data collection process consisted of three phases: one-on-one interviews, examination of documents and artifacts, and a review of mentor-recorded observations. Saldana (2013) proposes several types of preliminary coding methods to ferret out the substance of raw material gathered from interviews, documents, and artifacts. Among them are initial coding and in vivo coding that were used in the first cycle of the analysis. He also offers a second cycle during which focused coding "highlights major categories or themes from the data" (Saldana, 2013, p. 213). Through the development of categories from the iterative analysis, primary themes emerged, representative of the participants' voices (Creswell, 2007).

Thematic Findings

Emergent themes addressed the research questions and were expressive of specific interactions between the participants, their peers, and administrators; systemic professional development systems; and practices as experiential learners. The themes are organized chronologically, indicating the participants' developmental and experiential learning as well as their needs throughout the induction process:

Theme 1: Transition from Pre-Service to Induction

Participants' transition experiences varied by the status in which they entered the education field. Ranging from former emergency permit holders and in-

terns, who received little to no mentoring, to individuals who did student teaching with a master or cooperating teacher, their transitional experiences varied from tedious to smooth. Those who had early learning opportunities with a veteran teacher or supportive administrators seamlessly integrated. Those who had gaps in mentoring or field experiences expressed that they had “some catching up to do.”

Theme 2: Context for Teaching and Learning

The Context for Teaching and Learning (California Induction, 2012), a module in the induction curriculum, strongly resonated in the participants' experiences. Reflecting on this medium, participants expressed that “teachers do not teach to a sea of faces” or in a “vacuum.” Instead, students access the curriculum with increased engagement when teachers make connections through the students' life experiences, gleaned from eliciting students' background knowledge.

Theme 3: Collaboration with Peers

Collaboration with peers emerged as a compelling focal point among participants. They recounted invaluable experiences that served as an impetus for progress in the induction phase. “Having a shoulder to cry on” or “a joy to express” amounted to cathartic bonding and a comfort zone for the participants to thrive. This provided an environment to build self-confidence and emulate leadership abilities that were demonstrated in many of their members. Besides the emotional benefits of collaboration, the participants reveled in the opportunities to tap into the knowledge of others with whom they shared the same content areas. Moreover, wherever possible, cross-curricular lesson plans could be pursued. All of these collaborative factors led to strong relationship building and networking, many of which have continued into present practice.

Theme 4: Subtle Shift from Content Standards to Common Core Standards

Participants did not experience a dramatic change in the implementation of Common Core. Some expressed that they were not fully educated on the standards and the manner in which they should facilitate instruction, whereas others either felt they were already teaching according to the Common Core style or that administrators were not monitoring classroom instruction for Common Core strategies. Some participants who looked to their mentors and other veteran teachers for modeling were left unsatisfied because they, too, were either inexperienced or reverted to the

content standards, since there was no accountability in place for transition to Common Core.

In a few instances, district initiatives and programs enabled participants with the requisite skills for incorporating the standards into classroom instruction. Participants who were either exposed to or had joined the integrated curriculum teams reported having relatable experiences with cross-curricular peers and felt confident returning to their classrooms to practice cooperative learning with students.

Theme 5: Questioning and Ascertaining the Merits of Inquiry as Professional Development

While three participants were clear in their dissent of inquiry as a form of job-embedded professional development, others who assented, were also mindful of the drawbacks, even though they did not espouse those views. It was evident that the dissenters had little faith in their projects as evidenced by Charles' perceptions of limited validity of results, Fred's fear to experiment with a time-consuming, potentially non-valuable endeavor, and Lucy's dissatisfaction with a unilateral project. While the dissenters found some merits of activities within the inquiry-based projects, as a whole, they did not perceive it to have long term impact on their professional learning.

Theme 6: Learning by Experimentation and from Life Experiences

Learning through experimentation and from life experiences was meaningful to the participants. Reportedly, having to navigate by trial and error and problem-solve for solutions within their work environment proved beneficial to them. Whether they came to the profession with skills from previous careers or felt imbued by their disciplined mindsets, the participants were cognizant that experimentation and life lessons proved valuable in their day-to-day decision-making in the classroom. From learning through failure, tapping into background experiences and balancing their professional workloads, the participants incorporated their experiential skillsets into practice as an attempt at enabling a feasible work environment for professional success. Others who had limited experience relied on their gut instincts and learned mostly by “doing,” aiming to recover early from the mistakes they made.

Theme 7: Current Practice as the Ultimate Payoff

Participants reported that the challenges, battles, and experiential learning during induction were deemed a fundamental investment in learning how to teach. According to the participants, current success-

ful practices were the ultimate payoff. Time spent in trainings, collaboration with peers, and reflections with their support providers proved to be valuable in the development of instructional practices, utilized in their content areas. In the content area of math, the participating teacher reported using inquiry strategies to get his students to accept failure as a part of learning. In science, one participant found investigation and discovery were high-yield strategies for her practice, whereas the other relied on best practices from other teachers and her own research. In English language arts, participants extolled the virtues of cooperative groups, analyzing complex texts and investigative projects. The two world language teachers utilized thinking maps, visuals, and listening and speaking strategies. Finally, the special education teachers emphasized skills for real-world applications, such as job applications and expanded literacy opportunities.

Theme 8: Nurturing Experiential Learning

Participants reported being nurtured along the induction path by site administrators, support providers, peers and family. Notably, the level of nurturing varied among site administrators: three participants named their principals as having contributed outstanding support to their development; the remaining participants reported that their administrative staff provided the enabling environment, but there were no significant efforts to nurture them. Reportedly, elements of frequent communication, meaningful classroom visits and just-in-time support were available from support providers. As well, peer-to-peer support through teamwork and an established learning community bolstered experiential practices.

Theme 9: Obstacles to Induction

Participants stated that despite the benefits of the induction program, a number of obstacles needed to be addressed. Practical and time-sensitive district and site orientations surfaced as areas of deficiency as well as lengthy after school induction meetings. Absence of flexibility within the program to enroll beginning teachers throughout the year was deemed problematic for individuals who had no mentors or support during this phase. In addition, time spent on compiling an evidence binder was perceived as burdensome and needed to be reduced. Lack of efforts to streamline higher education enrollment with the induction process was also a factor that emerged as a deficit.

Theme 10: Managing the 21st Century Classroom

On preparation for the complex 21st century classroom, participants reported that while the induction

program prepared them in significant ways, there is much room for improvement. Classroom management, for example, that addresses integrating technology into instruction was lacking. Furthermore, learning how to prepare students for the rigor and endurance of pursuing careers that may occur before or after college was non-existent. Similarly, ascertaining the means to facilitate a socio-cultural learning community that embraces ethnicity, sexual orientation and religions often proved challenging.

Implications for Practitioners and Researchers

Based on the research findings about the *induction experience of beginning teachers during the implementation of Common Core Standards in a California suburban high school district*, factors emerged that may have implications for practice and future research.

Value Placed on Student Data Analysis

Participants expressed satisfaction with the process of data-gathering to assess measurable outcomes from their teacher-created assessments (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Although they had not received formal training in analyzing assessments, they expressed that they acquired considerable advantages when they made meaning of the data that resulted from their inquiry projects (Ross & Bruce, 2012). Given the contemporary appeal to plan and differentiate instruction based on the results of data analysis, it is essential that teachers are skilled in this competency (Reeves, 2010). To enhance practice, further professional development in data analysis via curriculum rubrics and assessment metrics is warranted for these teachers as they advance in their careers.

Participation in Integrated Curriculum Teams

Participants attributed strengthening of curricular knowledge as one of the benefits of collaboration with peers and veteran teachers, toward their success in induction and transition to Common Core standards. Participants who had voluntarily enrolled in the district's integrated curriculum teams found the experience meaningful to their content area and cross-curricular content areas. Given the opportunities to collaborate with teachers at all experience levels, they quickly discovered and acclimated to instructional strategies that yielded success in the classroom. In fact, lesson planning during the curriculum teams' unit design was often used to augment their inquiry projects. The practice of engaging beginning teachers in integrated curriculum teams needs to be further developed and facilitated in light of the era of shifting paradigms.

Providing Context for Teaching and Learning

Given that the participants expressed tremendous praise for tools that they used to learn about students' backgrounds and cultural connections, it may be worthwhile to build on this mechanism for practice. One of the biggest challenges in today's schools is lack of student engagement (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Students often drop out because they do not feel connected with teachers of different class, culture, and socio-economic status (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Pursuing additional and consistent professional development on student connections could be a fruitful investment for improving student engagement.

Future Research

Throughout the study, former emergency permit holders and interns asserted that they would have been better served if their assimilation into the teaching profession had begun with formal induction. This was in reference to the gap phase during which teachers had to wait for a new cycle of induction enrollment if they earned their preliminary credential months after the school year had begun. Teachers who were in this situation persevered through challenges without a mentor, feeling frustrated and unsupported throughout this turbulent period. However, once they eventually began the induction program and came to terms with its structure and procedures, they surmised that they reaped significant benefits for professional growth. Further research is necessary to identify the specific needs of teachers who enter the education profession through alternative means without any pre-service practicums or experience. It is apparent that the professional development needs of these teachers need to be addressed through the design of a bridge phase to induction. Furthermore, stronger alliances and collaboration between induction programs and institutions of higher education should be explored to accommodate their needs.

Five beginning teachers in this study that came from a previous career brought skills and talents that enabled a modicum of confidence in their experimentation with instructional strategies. This level of initial success warrants further research on beginning teachers who enter the profession from previous careers. While they tend to bring more maturity and fortitude toward the challenges that surface, it may be necessary to determine further the type of professional development best suited for them toward the goal of differentiated professional learning.

Since some participants identified recordkeeping of induction paperwork as burdensome and, in some

instances, an obstacle to time for lesson planning and assessment activities, there may be a need to consider minimizing the bureaucratic elements involved in the induction process. Further research is necessary to analyze the cost benefit of requiring records that capture individual progress for program data versus allowing maximum time for beginning teachers to pursue curricular activities.

Conclusion

This qualitative study set out to discover experiences of former beginning teachers in a California district induction program as they entered the profession during the curricular, systemic shift from state content standards to Common Core standards. The participants expressed that while they had faced significant challenges in adapting to their classroom and school environments, the induction program provided multiple tools for a practical transition. Participants reported that they developed skills to navigate the world of students, mentors and administrators when given opportunities to learn experientially and to incorporate background knowledge they brought to the profession.

Collaboration with peers stood out as a major success among the participants' perspectives. Having a community in which they shared successes and failures without judgment of others proved cathartic to the beginning teachers. The opportunity for first year teachers to connect with second year teachers was of considerable benefit since the second-year teachers could inspire them with success stories and extoll the virtues of "learning by doing."

While the curricular shift to Common Core did not surface as an impediment or challenge to teacher development, the beginning teachers perceived it as a subtle call for "rigor and relevance" without clear directives. According to their accounts, there was little to no pressure to transition to the new standards or any accountability to show evidence of adhering to them. Ostensibly, their school leaders and mentors were not yet comfortable with the change effort, and participants reported that authentic expertise was lacking. Nevertheless, some participants indicated that undergraduate coursework in the disciplines of science and English language arts, existing district initiatives and participation in curriculum integrated teams functioned as their preparation.

Despite perceived obstacles, all participants were grateful for the induction experience and highly recommended it as a mandatory prerequisite for pre-service transition to professional practice and recom-

mentation for a clear teaching credential. Although they initially perceived induction as “one more hoop to jump through,” they conveyed emerging as stronger teachers than when they began their journeys.

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