Shifting the Learning Paradigm of Preservice Teacher Observations

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Abstract

Reflective teaching has long been acknowledged as a desirable goal of teacher education programs. This paper reports the findings of an investigation of seven preservice secondary school teachers' interpretations of the school observations at an HBCU. Each preservice teacher participated providing feedback, in which the researcher asked for elaboration and clarification of the written responses. This article focused on a deeper analysis of preservice teachers' observations as a group based on the reflective feedback during the 30-hour course requirement. Participants who completed the 30-hour requirement as a group indicated they garnered a greater satisfaction throughout the process than separately.

Keywords: preservice teacher, school observations, reflective feedback

1. Introduction

Research indicates that a strong classroom teacher is the most important determinant of student success. Teacher preparation is crucial to developing teachers capable to building relationships and performing effectively as instructional leaders. Joint ownership in this process involve local education agencies and universities ensuring that future leaders have the disposition, skills, knowledge, and abilities to lead student learning (National Research Council, 2003). Bridging the gap between theory and practice has long been an essential aim of teacher education programs. Clinical experience has traditionally been considered a valuable and essential in this endeavor. Thusly, classroom observations play a critical role in preservice teachers constructing the prerequisite skills needed for smooth transition into full-time teaching positions (Bielefeldt, 2012). At present, preservice teacher generally do not receive meaningful feedback on instructional practices and have little hands-on experience during their coursework. As far back as Darling-Hammond (1997) recommended that pre-service teachers should be offered more authentic experiences to prepare them to handle the complexity and challenges of the school context. Teacher education programs are committed to the betterment of society through a life-long quest for excellence in learning and communication of ideas. Field-based observation are so important and essential to teacher education programs; teacher educators are using electronic mediums to assist teacher education candidates in being as reflective as possible.

2. Literature Review

Prager (1982) asserted that every minority group in the United States faces challenges that pertain to a dual identity—one in relation to group members and another with respect to the dominant group in society. Prager further contended that the duality of African Americans in the United States is characteristically different from other minority groups because what is attributed to being African American contrasts what is esteemed in society. Arne Duncan (2010) asserted that many of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom. He stated "Rural classrooms are facing shortages and we have far too few teachers of color", while "high-poverty, high-needs schools still struggle to attract and retain good teachers." In 1997, Linda Darling Hammond argued that "teacher quality is the factor that matters most for student learning." She stated that teachers must be selected not only on the basis of their academic credentials, but also on the likelihood that they will remain in the profession long enough to make an impact. Teachers are needed to meet the classroom needs of disadvantaged children and the accountability standards of various states particular teachers are needed to narrow the achievement gap between high and low socioeconomic students.

The cost of teacher turnover is unusually high and deprives our schools of the needed personnel resources. The impact of the low teacher retention can be devastating to a school district. Clearly, closing the student achievement gap depends on closing the teacher gap (Darling Hammond). Cochran-Smith (2011) stated that teachers are expected to be responsible for students' improvement on high-stakes tests, adept at classroom technology, proficient to differentiate curriculum and instruction for students as well as those with special needs, able to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of working with multiple cultures.

2.1 Pedagogical Content Knowledge

All teachers construct meaning of events in their heads when confronted with the challenge of teaching particular subjects to particular learners in specific settings. In fact, there are some kinds of knowledge such as powerful pedagogical representations (e.g., analogies, metaphors, narratives) that can be acquired and transformed by teachers when designing instruction in complicated areas (Shulman, 2015). Learning to teach is no longer thought of where student teachers enter with theory and methods to practice teaching. Instead, teaching takes place over time rather than at isolated moments (Cochran-Smith, 2011b). Observing content-specific instruction must be situated in the disciplinary, cultural, personal, and social setting in which it occurs (Shulman) rather than receiving information from outside and applying it in the same context (Cochran-Smith). In this context, preservice teachers may feel a contradiction between a theoretical instructional construct and the way that gets played out in the immediacy of practice (Demetrion, 2012). Underperforming schools are often staffed by teachers and administrators who, with the best of intentions, have low expectations for the academic achievement of their students. By now, there is a large body of evidence which indicates that such expectations have negative consequences for the nature of the curriculum experienced by students, the quality of instruction provided by teachers and the motivation of students to learn (Cochran-Smith, 2011a).

This set of causes of school underperformance are about lack of instructional capacity for students being served by the school, a lack of capacity that is rooted in individuals lacking both experience and skill (Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Carroll, 2009). This study asks that preservice teachers recount their classroom clinical experiences, compare them to what they know about teaching and learning, and then reflect on their teaching accordingly. By mastering the art and skill of reflection, preservice teachers will increase their abilities to improve and modify their teaching. It is the assumption that preservice teachers who have adopted reflective practices will be better equipped to meet their students' individual needs (Harland & Wondra, 2011).Beginning teachers typically start the new year by not knowing what to do, but, like all teachers, must be critical thinkers dealing with new questions and new problems (Cochran-Smith, 2011a). While teacher preservice and years of experience are linked to student achievement in much of the previous research, teacher process is the least studied method. The distribution of high quality teachers across schools and districts varies (Knoeppel, 2007). Teachers with less experience, education, and lower test performance are most likely to work in high minority, high poverty, and low-performing schools (Knoeppel, 2007) indicating the necessity for preservice interaction prior to full-time clinical experience.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Social Constructivism

This paper draws from the theoretical underpinning that knowledge is constructed actively by learners within a socio-cultural context. Social constructivism extends constructivist approach to learning. Proponents of social constructivism are of the view that knowledge is first constructed in a social context and is then appropriated by individuals. Bandura (1977) described social learning of most human behavior as learned observationally through modeling. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (the distance between the actual developmental level -as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development -as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers) is bridged by collaborative learning opportunities. The shared knowledge becomes a socially accepted and socially constructed knowledge that can be considered as knowledge within the group dynamic. The key concepts in Vygotsky's ZPD theory are 'assistance' and 'experience' at the level a student can handle so that he or she can learn. Social constructivism has more of an emphasis on the relationship between the individual and social requirements or interaction. Constructivists claim that there might be such absolute reality in nature, but construction of knowledge is limited to thinking, understanding, analyzing, synthesizing, and creating meanings through cognitive and practical actions.

However, different styles of teaching demand understanding of different styles of learning by students. Social constructivist is a paradigm where the participant constructs meaning to make decisions from the available alternatives through a connected network of self and others (Belbase, 2011). Social interaction can be misleading in relation to construction of knowledge (Bandura, 1977) if guidance is not provided through group reflection. Learning is a social process where one of the demands made on education is to prepare learners for a networked knowledge society that would require collaboration. Belbase stated that information "is expanded to be a part of broader social context, and construction of meaning is considered as social phenomena" (p. 3). Hashweh (2005) described PCK as "teacher pedagogical constructions" (p. 273), that is, individual, topic-specific knowledge that grows in a soil of private, personal knowledge, beliefs, and praxis (understood as the dialogic relationship among theory, action, observation and re-theorizing based on observed outcomes), and connects to other areas of a teacher's knowledge. Collaboration helps students learn more thoroughly, deeply and more efficiently than learning alone and helps in the preparation for the real world requiring team work. Students also learn to depend on one another instead of depending solely on the authority of experts and teachers. Social constructivists try to understand the nature of particular cultures and how people within them appropriate their surrounding culture's conceptions through mediating tools (Harland & Wondra, 2011; Hashweh, 2005). Group observations may involve division of the main task hierarchically into independent subtasks followed by assembly of the partial products through discussions and reflections.

Synchronous observations emerge from a continued attempt by learners to build and maintain a shared conception of the problem and ways to solve it (Dillenbourg, 1999). Social constructivism is sustained by the presumption of collaboration as a sort of social contract among the participants, which requires them to interact and contribute during the learning process. The social constructivist phenomenon elicits raw data which constructs knowledge for further processing through group discussions and sharing among other participants (Dillenbourg). This cognition of knowledge through reflective feedback makes teaching-learning nexus student friendly by beginning any discussion from preservice teacher experiences to the new (un-experienced) construct. The prime focus of constructivist teaching-learning is engaging in productive thinking, analyzing, and synthesizing of ideas through individual and the social construction of knowledge (Belbase, 2011).

3.2 Mentoring

Collaboration helps students learn more thoroughly, deeply and more efficiently than learning alone and helps in the preparation for the real world requiring team work. It is expected that schools and districts provide reasonable support to attract and retain the best and the brightest to the teaching profession. Participating school districts would need to provide 3 years of rigorous induction and mentoring for teachers. Most universities would have to substantially rethink their teacher education programs to meet standards established for the program, including a focus on student achievement rather than pedagogy, moving teacher education out of the ivory tower into the schools, integration of clinical and academic instruction and faculty, and preparing teachers to educate students like those they will actually teach. The research shows that no school-based intervention has a greater impact on student achievement than having an experienced and able teacher for 3 successive years (NRC, 2003). Carroll (2007) in NCTAF found that low performing schools rarely close the student achievement gap because they never close the teaching quality gap. Enormous amounts of human and financial capital are spent by hiring and replacing beginning teachers who leave before they master the ability to create a learning culture for their students. These schools drain their districts of dollars that could be spent to improve teaching quality but instead are in a chronic cycle of hiring and replacing teachers. Task-oriented methods make use of time spent on the lesson, the purpose of the lesson, and the students' need to process new information (Knoeppel, 2007; NRC, 2003). Teachers should keep the student productively involved throughout the lesson by starting class promptly with what is to be accomplished and the purpose for the activity (Cochran-Smith, 2011b). The challenge is using individual creativeness to keep the student on-task and involved with challenging tasks, give limited and purposeful homework. Mentoring is essential to scaffolding preservice teachers' first-year experience to having an impact on student learning. An effective lesson requires opportunities for students to make sense of the ideas with which they have been engaged (NRC, 2003). Because it is unlikely that students will be able to draw the appropriate conclusions on their own, regardless of how engaging the activities, it falls to the teacher to ensure that students make sense of their experience through explanations, skillful questioning, and/or the facilitation of class discussion (Hines & McMahon, 2005).

The teacher may also help them connect the ideas to their other knowledge, thereby placing the lesson's learning goals in a larger scientific framework and helping them organize their knowledge (NRC, 2003). Carroll (2009) stated that new teachers feel unprepared to meet classroom challenges in those first few years of teaching due to preparation programs not adequately providing teacher candidates with an authentic experience of what teaching is like in those first few years.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The purpose of this investigation was to uncover characteristics in preservice teachers' reflections during the 30-hour required school observations in middle and high schools located in central Alabama. Both schools were located in an urban area and had a student population of at least 90% African-American receiving free and reduced lunch (at least 75%). Participants in the investigation consisted of 7 preservice teachers who were enrolled in a required professional education course during the Spring 2015 semester. All had been admitted to the teacher education program and were currently completing the 30-hour course requirement for secondary education majors. The preservice teachers majored in the three content areas: three (3) were English Language Arts Education; three (3) were Social Science Education; and one (1) was General Science Education. To carry out this investigation, the researcher accompanied the preservice teachers for each school visit, assigned classroom teachers and class rotations, designated starting and ending times, and initiated reflective feedback.

The format of the 30-hour required field-based observation was that no more than four students entered a classroom at one time. The group arrived in the main office before the observations began to receive instructions and assignment "look-fors". The course professor accompanied at least one group to engage in dialogue and identify elements during instruction. The professor pre-arranged classroom visits with the inservice teachers and school administrator. The teacher allowed the preservice teachers to observe (occasionally participate) instruction and the school administrator prepared a space in the school building for immediate discussion and reflective feedback.

4.2 Research Design

The intent of this investigation was to examine the preservice teachers' reflective feedback in light of their beginning stage of preparation engaging with students during real-life classroom instruction. The ease of conducting the study was possible by virtue of the small number of participating preservice teachers and the method of data collection. The reflections were collected through Google doc using the following research questions:

1. Briefly describe what happened during this observation.
2. What did this observation help you recognize about where you are in your own practice and preparation?
3. Did you identify with anything that happened in the class?
4. Did this experience make you want to change or implement something new?
5. In conducting this observation, what thoughts did you have about the practice of teaching and learning in general? For instance, did your observation inform your thinking about big picture issues like classroom management or student engagement?
6. Did you change your mind about anything, or confirm beliefs you already had?
7. What suggestions or ideas might you share about your experience?
8. As you reflect on the lesson, were students cognitively engaged in the work? How do you know?
9. If you were to teach/repeat this activity again, what might you do (if anything) differently?

5. Findings

The outcome of analyzing the conversation drawn from this text within the clinical experience is that it plays upon the natural discussion of university professor and preservice teacher as a motivator for exploring the instructional choices, socio-behavioral management and the impact of student engagement via the perception of the learning. Another outcome is that the university professor found a new medium in which to gain insight on his preservice teachers' perception of learning, revealing the themes of metacognition. The relationship of this field experience to the purpose of the research is manifested in the rich discussion and authentic feedback of the students provided in response to the questions.

The reflection assessment followed a modified structure of Hattie and Smith (1995) to reduce the categories, thereby making coding manageable for the study. The research questions are followed by the coded responses.

Briefly describe what happened during this observation.

- Went over the lesson with her class. The class & [the teacher] played a game.
- Very little class disruptions
- Full of chaos and teacher had no control
- Allowed her students to work through their situations
- Bellringer and then they did reflective journals
- [The] teacher was actively engaged with the students
- Students presented rap songs to show their understanding
- [Students] weren't really receptive to [the teacher's] instructions
- Teaching on reflections from [other students'] writings
- Doing a rap about math or either they made a video
- A new during strategy named "Coding the text"
- Working in centers to complete [work]

What did this observation help you recognize about where you are in your own practice and preparation? Did you identify with anything that happened in the class? Did this experience make you want to change or implement something new?

- Class management is the sole driving force behind the flow of [the] classroom
- Allowed them to express their feelings, but in the end, the students knew that [the teacher] had the final say
- Recognize that I may want to gain lots of classroom management skills. I could not identify with anything in this class. This experience made me want to implement more rules so that my class will behave, especially when guests are in my classroom
- This experience helped me to recognize some things that I would like to do in my own classroom. I could identify with the students studying Faulkner. I would like to implement music and free writing in my class.
- How to interact with my students
- Give my students a decent amount of time to complete assignments
- This observation helped me to recognize that it is okay to have a type of friendship with students as long as they respect the teacher. I would like to implement freedom in my classroom because I saw how it worked for this class and there were no problems.
- This observation helped me to identify that teachers should do more than sit at their desks if they want to keep the students' attention.
- Hear my students out it is how you do it that matters
- Implement activities that make students participate in critical thinking questions
- Although she did not do any lecture style teaching, she did deal with some discipline issues in the class.
- I recognized that I like to lecture and tell amazing stories
- Often times, teachers must use lingo to relate to the students, in order to maintain a relationship
- It helped me realize that I need to be more intuitive with my classroom design.
- I realized it is not difficult to create a rapport with students if you demand their respect in a friendly but firm tone.
- The class was separated, one side was girls and one side was boys

In conducting this observation, what thoughts did you have about the practice of teaching and learning in general? For instance, did your observation inform your thinking about big picture issues like classroom management or student engagement?

- This observation informed me that classroom management is what you make it.
- I learned that you can't expect to go in being a pessimist nor can you for one second let your guard down when referring to discipline.
- I think that [the teacher] has a good system on how [to conduct] classroom management. You can see that he wants his students to pass. By documenting everything that happens in the classroom allows him to do that.

- By establishing a good relationship with your students allows you to have good classroom management and let the class basically run itself.
- I learned that keeping the students busy with positive work, the classroom management will not be much of an issue.
- This observation showed me that students will cooperate with the teacher, especially if they are engaged in some type of activity.
- One thought I had was that you must speak clearly and be firm. The students must know what you want and be ready to deliver when the time comes for the work to be done.
- During this observation my thoughts about teaching and learning in general was that you must keep the students engaged and you must keep the classroom managed in order to complete the lesson in a timely manner.
- Classroom management seems like it is completely obtainable in theory but practically speaking it is very difficult to maintain.
- During reading I learned how important it is to show pictures after every picture during reading.

Did you change your mind about anything, or confirm beliefs you already had? What suggestions or ideas might you share about your experience?

- It confirmed that it is ok to have some relationship with your students. Having a relationship with them allows you to know how your students act and feel. It allows you to know their behavior patterns, which allows you to know how to handle any conduct problems.
- I have no thoughts on this question.
- This observation did not make me change my mind about anything.
- No I did not change my mind about anything but my senior high English teacher once told us to make sure we don't get senioritis. That is don't get so comfortable in the fact the [students] will be graduating that you stop doing the work.
- One belief I confirmed was that you must be in front of the classroom getting everyone involved not letting anyone just sit there and not participate.
- Yes, it confirmed that you must control your class or your class will control you.
- It confirmed the belief that music can definitely help students learn any subject.
- It confirmed the belief that classroom lectures have to be informative and interesting to keep the students attention and make them want to be involved.
- This taught me that every assessment does not have to be done in solitude
- Using other teachers' ideas are very helpful in finding new activities to keep students engaged.
- I enjoyed my time interacting with the elementary students which I did not think I would particularly enjoy it.
- It confirmed my belief that the multiple learning theory helped a variety of students.

As you reflect on the lesson, were students cognitively engaged in the work? How do you know?

- Students were actively engaged in their preparation for their test because the teacher gave them time to study before the exam.
- Yes. By reading their journals showed that they complete their work and put some thought into it.
- Students were actively engaged in their work because they were interested in the grammar lesson and they were happy to answer questions.

If you were to teach/repeat this activity again, what might you do (if anything) differently?

- walk around and monitor students on the ipads more
- I would not do anything differently.
- I would have referrals and consequence work on standby.
- There is nothing that I would do differently except have more confidence.
- I would try to help the students get a better understanding of what to do.
- I would find something to help keep the more misbehaved students busy so that they are not disrupting others.
- I would give students less time to work on certain parts, just so students are staying on track
- Give students a list of ideas, examples, and a clear picture of where they should retrieve the information from
- I would try to interject into some of the scholarly discussions the students were having.

6. Discussion

Cochran-Smith (2011b) stated that new teachers should enter teaching with an open mind to keep learning over time – how to pose important questions, develop new ways of seeing, unpack help assumptions, and work with colleagues to transform students' learning opportunities and outcomes. Teacher education programs expect teaching candidates to actively reflect on what they see and do in the cooperating classroom. To support this process, candidates should plan to document their experiences, maintaining a log or journal of their activities and observations for each visit. These journals may be expected to be electronically produced and shared with the professor. The university professor attempted to make the preservice teacher process safe yet challenging. This took place in the midst of the professor deconstructing his own positionality to monitor and maintain objectivity for each participant. Most preservice teachers feel unprepared to having their first teaching assignment until current teachers explain the details that are involved with dealing with discipline, paperwork, parent communication, and personal lives of students (which often contribute to classroom misbehavior). It was noted during discussions that preservice teachers are greatly influenced by mentors prior to pursuing higher education, and more than likely will emulate witnessed behaviors, style, methods, and strategies. However, they became aware that they possess their own style which is completely different from their experience. Modeling instructional strategies used by their favorite teachers was found challenging but manageable, but they were not pleased with the methods used to carry out the strategies for learning.

The private conversations opened up the possibility of inquiry about anything and covered a wide-range of school experiences. At times the conversations garnered data from fact-finding to expectations and from information-gathering to questions about ability and apprehension issues in the classroom. The future teachers attempted to make sense of the how veteran teachers develop lifelong relationships with students who become teachers and their own philosophical approach to manage the curriculum while balancing student engagement and expectations of a professional educator. It was interesting to note that several participants responded "they no opinion on the matter" but later responded they changed the way they thought about it. The final interview revealed that this observation format provided a realistic approach that was more intrinsically applicable to transitioning into full-time teaching. Several participants commented that they are looking forward to completing the subsequent course since it will require similar format to reflective feedback. Certainly all types of formative assessment is required to becoming a reflective practitioner in the teacher education program, but facilitating learning through social constructivism promotes deeper levels of inquiry. Most of the preservice teachers in this study reflected at an understanding level which may be the required level of their coursework. Although this connection is crucial, creating reflective feedback environments (whether individual writing and group discussions) may help shift how they think about acknowledging their weaknesses and insecurities, and their readiness to deal with the dynamics in teaching. Teacher preparation courses can create environments where preservice teachers use reflections to examine their own assumptions about teaching and learning while building from social constructivism to improve their practice.

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