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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEACHER AS A PROFESSIONAL IN AN ALTERNATIVE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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*Recruitment and retention strategies are a growing concern for Catholic educational leaders. This article offers a glimpse into the dynamics of a leading teacher recruitment effort, the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) sponsored by the University of Notre Dame. After surveying the first two cohorts who taught in Catholic schools through ACE, the authors uncover significant and meaningful components of this alternative teacher preparation program with a view to challenging traditional teacher education efforts and preservice requirements.*

Discussion about the potential for improving the quality of our nation's teaching workforce is plentiful. Much of this discussion has centered on the testing of teachers' basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics; increases in clinical experiences in schools; the shortage of minority teachers; and development of more rigorous certification requirements by states. A variety of recommendations from influential national reports have focused on making the education of teachers more intellectually solid; recognizing differences in teachers' skills, commitment, education, and certification; and the necessity to connect the business sector to schools (The Holmes Group, 1986).

Some states are resorting to the widespread use of emergency certifications because they cannot find the number of graduates from traditional teacher education programs to meet their needs (McKibbin, 1999). Partly as

a consequence of these shortages, some school districts are turning toward alternative teacher education programs as one source for teachers.

This study examines an alternative teacher education program that is unique in many ways. It allows college graduates, who are not necessarily education majors, to become enveloped in a program of support and structure where they can "learn the ropes" and develop into teacher professionals.

## **BACKGROUND: AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM**

For the past four years, the School of Education of the University of Portland participated in a unique alternative teacher education effort. The program, Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), is a collaborative effort of the University of Portland, the University of Notre Dame, and the National Catholic Educational Association. The three tenets of the program are faith, teaching, and service. As faculty of the University of Portland, we have been involved in designing and implementing this experiential, field-based Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program. The primary intent of the model is to prepare recent college graduates holding bachelor's degrees in a variety of subject areas, not necessarily education, to become teachers in Catholic diocesan schools in the southern regions of the United States. The program also provides teacher licensure for those who successfully complete the program. Participants are selected through an application and interview process.

As participants, intern teachers are required to commit to two years of service as teachers in an assigned diocesan school. Before beginning their teaching assignment, these aspiring teachers experience a summer of intensive coursework (e.g., Dimensions in Education, Instructional Processes, Assessment and Evaluation, and Social and Cultural Foundations). These courses are supplemented by a clinical, supervised teaching experience in their classrooms during the following academic year. The process is continued for a second summer and academic year. Over the two-year span, interns also receive direct assistance and support from their principals, a mentor teacher at each school, and a clinical supervisor from the University of Portland. One unique feature of the ACE experience is that interns live in mixed-gender faith communities of four to eight members. The diocese occasionally provides housing assistance. Because the ACE program has only been in operation for four years, our study focuses on the data collected from the first two cohort groups (ACE Group I and ACE Group II) that have completed the program.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Classroom experience has the single greatest role to play in the learning process of new teachers (Goodlad, 1994; Haberman, 1995; Jackson, 1986).

This research study, however, focuses additionally on those program features that interns found valuable in shaping their roles as teachers. Hunter (1969) wrote,

Teaching is a learned profession, not a genetically based or God-given trait. Of course individuals vary in aptitudes and interests which make it harder or easier to become competent in the profession of teaching, but teachers are not born, they're made. (p. 1)

The nature of their being made is in large part due to the nurturing support system received as novices. In most cases, the rite of passage is a series of disjointed, isolated, trial-and-error experiences in the loneliness of one's classroom. Few colleagues assume responsibility for novices; most schools have no formal vehicle for acculturating beginners.

An emerging body of research indicates that most successful teachers attribute their instructional success to their personal and professional growth and their own personal attributes (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Lieberman, 1988; Maeroff, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1996). In fact, Featherstone (1993) found that successful beginning teachers must develop a "public persona" in their new professional positions. Beginning teachers often find their teaching experience has transformed their personal and professional lives (Featherstone, 1993; Marsick, 1998).

A number of researchers have focused on different aspects of the development of beginning teachers. Some have studied the beginning teachers' characteristics and dispositions (Ackley & Arwood, 1999; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Flaitz, 1987; Pratt, 1986); others, the perceived problems of beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984); while still others, the knowledge base that beginning teachers need to be effective (Reynolds, 1992). Other groups of researchers have begun to examine field-based reform and other alternative teacher education programs to determine which program features may be more successful (Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Goodlad, 1994; Haberman, 1995; Howey & Zimpher, 1989; Sears, Marshall, & Otis-Wilborn, 1994).

With an awareness of the multitude of ways in which teacher education has been examined, critiqued, and assayed, we sensed that there are unique features of this ACE program that could add to the knowledge base. We embarked on an action research journey to identify, from the teacher interns' perspectives, their perceptions of the extent to which different aspects of our program contributed to their professional growth.

## METHOD

A survey instrument (see Appendix) was developed to gather information about interns' experiences in their supervised field assignments; it was distributed to those members of the first two graduating classes of the Alliance

for Catholic Education MAT program whom the University supervisors, mentor teachers, and school principals identified as "effective teachers." Selection criteria included teaching performance in areas such as student engagement, classroom management, and teacher-student interactions. The survey was distributed to 51 individuals. Each survey was mailed as a package consisting of a cover letter, a confidentiality statement, an informed consent form, and a return envelope with postage. The cover letter identified the purpose of the survey, the estimated time required to complete, and the requested mail-back date. Participants were requested to return the completed survey within four weeks of receipt. Contact information for the researchers was provided. Of the 51 surveys distributed, 20 were completed and returned.

A 10-point scale was used with rankings ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 10. Along with the scale, open-ended questions were also included. The Likert data were examined using standard, descriptive statistical techniques. The open-ended questions asked for further elaboration. For purposes of this study these open-ended responses were analyzed since they were found to be richer, more descriptive, and more illuminating than the numerical analysis of ratings. They capture best the nuances, attitudes, and impressions of the interns with respect to their development as young professionals. Categories emerged as a result of coding responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The categories were then analyzed as patterns. These patterns explicated the extent to which the internship experiences influenced participants' success as teachers, as well as growth in their personal development.

## FROM CATEGORIES TO PATTERNS

The categories that emerged from coding identified the interns' perceptions of their experiences. One category, for example, related to the perceived growing confidence and self-assuredness of ACE interns. This was attributed to formidable experiences in leadership roles while in secondary and undergraduate school and to on-the-job ACE teaching experiences.

Another category related to the issue of support both from the peer group community and the mentors and supervisors. Other categories centered on teacher interns' beliefs in the goodness of their students, their students' ability to learn, and the fact that they (students) deserve the best from the teacher.

Four major patterns emerged from analyzing the categories of responses. Unlike most novices, these ACE interns did not enter work abruptly with minimal support, nor did they experience the typical isolation that is characteristic of our profession. Reflection and professional dialogue, joint learning, and improving the teaching skills of any one of them were collective tasks. They became learning communities; their experience was unique—just how unique is illustrated in the descriptions of patterns that follow.

## **PATTERN 1: A LEARNING FRAME OF MIND OR THE RIGHT STUFF**

This cluster is grounded in a fundamental sense of self-determination (a strong will and level of high expectations), self-confidence (a strong belief in self), and commitment of self to serving humanity as God's agent (spirituality). These, in part, provided interns with the sense of resiliency that was necessary to face the challenges of teaching. More than half the group of respondents expressed, for example, a distinct unwillingness to compromise, to resist settling for "good enough," and an inner drive to strive continually for better. Examples of this can be captured in the following simple but profound response: "I continually refused to accept anything except my best efforts in the classroom."

For the most part, interns possessed a healthy self-concept (trusting and believing in the self) and the accompanying ego strength necessary to move from a state of coping with initial student teaching challenges to one of transcendence—toward becoming a reflective and effective teacher.

Responses indicated that they had a range of prior learning experiences in which they were able to become self-directed and responsible self-starters. These primarily occurred in family environments as well as in early schooling experiences. Some cited experiences in public speaking, debate, and student leadership roles. Others identified the training provided through courses which helped to develop skills, provide feedback, and present modeling of effective teaching.

Through these experiences, they learned to be initiating, communicative, and introspective, as well as responsive to the needs of others. Despite the self-doubts, frustrations, compromises, and setbacks, these interns were able to retain their high standards, sense of self-accountability, and need to be self-critical. The self-drive to "never give up" and achieve was pervasive and persistent.

The classroom, then, became a forum in which these attributes and values could play themselves out. Interns recognized the journey of self and the frustrations and struggles that accompany it, but had the strength and a "no-excuse" attitude to confront these challenges. Given the confidence and self-determination, the experiences of these interns became the laboratory for learning. They were able to be open to reflecting and examining experiences, interpreting new meaning from them, and engaging in building their mental models. Without this inner strength and conviction, we suspect, their level of success would have been compromised.

## **PATTERN 2: SOURCES OF SUPPORT IN THE LEARNING COMMUNITY**

As they entered their internships, ACE members experienced a broad spectrum of acculturation challenges: moving to a new city, entering the context of the school, assuming the new roles of teachers, confronting teaching responsibilities with minimal preservice experiences, being perceived by a new set of colleagues as qualified teachers, building social lives, and becoming contributing and collaborative members of their peer communities. They found themselves in several learning communities: ACE living communities, their respective school communities, the community of the classroom, the diocesan communities, and the community of interns and instructors from both collaborating universities throughout their two-year experiences.

Of the various communities of support experienced by ACE interns, ranked most significantly was the creation of the onsite living communities developed among interns at various sites. There is strong consensus that the sense of caring, belonging, and collective meaning of experiences that the ACE interns had in these communities is fundamental to their development as professionals and, we believe, influential as they become adult lifelong learners. These were communities in which it was safe to be oneself; places where praying, planning, and enjoying life flourished,

Most admit that the development of the mutually respecting and interdependent community living sites was essential to their self-development along personal and professional lines. Indeed, without the support and nurturance that came from their peers, many admit that they would not have experienced the success they had nor have remained in their professional roles during their internships. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest strengths as well as exceptionalities of the ACE experience is the extent to which the richness of living in community has been taken to its broadest level. It represents the establishment of a total community in which novices can grow with the nurturance of trusting colleagues. Some exemplary responses capture the interns' perceived value of these experiences as follows:

Living with people who can relate to what you go through on a daily basis is a wonderful support...[to] have individuals who are there to listen helps you grow stronger. Many decisions I struggle with are answered with the help of others.

Support from mentor teachers and other teachers in their schools was identified as another key influence in their professional development. Mentors, for example, were perceived as helping a great deal in answering a range of questions, from addressing issues of school routine and expectations to instructional challenges experienced in classrooms. Diocesan administra-

tors in some communities provided special “checking in” support to determine adequacy of housing accommodations, access to resources, and, in general, the well-being of groups. Finally, access to the professors representing both universities was acknowledged as a contributory factor to the success of the interns. This was a truly unique community in terms of communication, which ranged from periodic telementoring to onsite observations and feedback. States one intern: “They all offered fresh ideas and an objectivity, which I could never bring to the table alone.” Another acknowledges:

They [various professors] taught me to challenge myself as well as my students. I do not think I would have success in my job if I did not love what I did every day. And part of the reason I love what I do is because of the style I do it in.

All these support bases provided the interns with a rich and unique environment in which to test their understandings, try out instructional strategies, and refine their approaches through the richness of dialogue and collegial conversations both formal and informal—in short, to develop professionally. This support is lacking to most novices as they enter the profession.

### **PATTERN 3: FROM THE LEARNER’S FRAME OF REFERENCE**

Essentially interns believed that they could influence the achievement of students through effectively motivating, making a topic relevant, and being positive learner role models. Several admitted that influence of this nature is developmental and that it required the two-year time frame to begin to master these skills. One teacher intern states that she finds effective “a simple message that I give my students, ‘I believe in you,’ and to ask them to expect their ‘personal best’ from themselves.” Most viewed teaching as a unique opportunity to influence students. Stated clearly by one secondary intern:

Teachers are among a select few individuals in students’ lives who will be given a chance to motivate, to instruct, and to inspire each student. My students will enter the school year open to being motivated or inspired and it is how the teacher performs from then on that will be important.

There were no responses that questioned students’ abilities to learn or that expressed low expectations. In contrast, statements like the following characterize the positive attitudes of these teachers: “Every kid wants to learn”; “Every kid deserves the best”; “Every kid is basically good”; “Kids are gifts and need encouragement”; “Having a true belief in your own self-worth and conveying that belief to your students enables them to cultivate those same beliefs in themselves.” Despite the everyday challenges and frus-



trations, the implicit belief in their students—the recognition that students are our most important resources and that they deserve the best—sustained the enthusiasm and commitment of these teachers throughout their two-year experience.

Interns were asked to identify perceptions concerning teaching and learning. The two dimensions identified as most important in this area were related to the need to identify and empathetically understand individual learning style differences and to use a variety of teaching techniques (e.g., cooperative learning, experiential activities). In many instances, the importance of individual learning styles was simply not recognized or valued until interns entered the classroom. Some struggled with the challenge of helping students engage and grasp learning, to take ownership of their performance, and to increase their desire to learn. Interestingly, issues of classroom management, discipline, and self-control were seldom identified as major issues; rather, issues like responsibility for one's learning and increasing the desire to learn were. Significantly, then, these teachers moved beyond concerning themselves with teaching and began to focus more on learning and the role of the learner.

#### **PATTERN 4: THE EMERGING PROFESSIONAL**

ACE interns, for reasons cited earlier about living in community, had a unique advantage that most teachers crave—the opportunity to live collegially with peers. Exchanges about practice, instructional strategies, curriculum development, and navigating teacher-student relationships were commonplace in their evening and weekend interactions. A nightly practice for some groups was to gather around their dining room table swapping ideas about lesson planning, grading homework, and special-case students. The special bonding provided each of them with a unique and empathic understanding of each other's journeys, which was reciprocal and resulted in a reinforced belief in self and self-assuredness. Attests one intern: "The camaraderie among us rookie teachers is the kind of healthy bond that needs to be experienced by all new teachers."

Consequently, reflection and continual refinement of practice were hallmarks of the initial stages of development for the majority of interns. In most cases, they moved through an initial state of idealism in which, perhaps, the complexities of teaching were less than realized, in which students' levels of engagement and willingness to learn were naively expected, and in which classrooms would automatically become harmonious and stimulating places of learning. Students, during college course training, thought of themselves as classes or cohorts rather than a collection of unique individuals with special talents, skills, and needs. This was due, in part, to the interns' prior experiences as students themselves. Learning was not a constant struggle for most

of them; achievement was expected and realized. This frame of reference, in some ways, affected their expectations as first-year teachers. Struggles with classroom management issues, challenges with implementing active learning strategies, and issues of curriculum design resulted in new insight into the craft and the role of teacher. Mastering technique and carrying it off with ease and effectiveness was difficult. It did, however, result in the recognition and valuing of the role of teacher as facilitator of learning, the importance of discovery learning, and the need to address individual differences in the classroom.

A major learning emerged during this initial stage of development—a tempering of initial idealism about teaching and learning with more realistic expectations, the need to be firm but gentle in interactions with students, and the essentiality of treating each student as a unique individual. One teacher intern reveals further insight:

Each student is an individual, unable to be grouped into a specific category, with a story to tell. As a teacher, it is my job to first listen to that story and then to the best of my abilities, revolve the child's education around their own story; make them feel that you are telling a story and they are the main character. No matter race, gender, or economic background, all adolescents need adults in their lives who will include them, and for some, school is the only place where that can happen.

Perhaps most significant was the revaluing of teaching as a profession, the need to maintain high standards for entry into the profession, and the importance of moral connection between teaching and spirituality, for many pointed out the servant dimension of teaching. Another intern reflects on the moral dimension of teaching: "Good teachers believe that deep down every child wants to learn, wants to be accepted, wants to achieve. A good teacher believes that he or she can make a difference and does!" Stated more strongly by another: "Education and teaching cannot be divorced from religion; education, in the long haul, requires an appeal to God; without this, a good answer to the question, 'why learn?' does not exist."

A final indicator of the emergence of professionalism among the ACE interns was the development of a belief and value system that comes from their reflection on their practice. This is an emerging theory-of-action that every professional experiences. The major pattern of responses clustered around the attributes of providing and modeling respect, holding an unconditional belief in youth, demonstrating honesty in all situations, and possessing a genuine love for one's students. It was acknowledged by many that these attributes led to enhanced self-concept and self-confidence for interns. Teachers need to believe in themselves in spite of odds. Affirms one intern:

The most gratifying lesson I learned as a teacher was this: amongst all the hard work, the long days, the bad days, the frustration and stress, the late hours and early mornings—within all this, there are good, no, great days and that it can work! Students can and do learn and grow. And when that happens, if only to one student a year, then all of the struggles fade for you. For you have changed the life of another.

## CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with action research methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994), a series of categories and patterns emerged from the triangulated approach to data analysis. These were translated as learnings that support our contention that the ACE alternative teacher preparation program had a profound and positive impact on participants' attitudes and beliefs. The unique professional experience of living and learning in communities enabled exceptional and unique peer and collegial relationships to develop. The sharing of daily teaching experiences, the "communal" building of lesson plans and units, and the positive problem-solving peer dialogues during evening hours and weekends resulted in positive socio-emotional development of these young professionals. This is in stark contrast to the initial career experiences of most teaching professionals that is characterized by isolation and lack of peer support (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Lieberman, 1988; Maeroff, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1996). Although the program did not "make" or "create" a teacher, it was of significant influence. To many it was the "nature" of teaching that developed the public persona. Skills and abilities were influenced by program structures. Views were broadened, changed, and expanded. A strong sense of self emerged, self-confidence grew, and skills were developed and honed.

The single most unique feature of the program valued by teacher interns was the faith community in which each group lived, studied, and rehearsed their professional roles with peers. In this community, relationships thrived and a sense of shared meaning and valuing about teaching emerged.

Another program feature that interns found influential in contributing to their success was exposure to research and teaching techniques learned during MAT course work. Interns valued this summer classroom work for the acquisition of best-practice strategies and techniques that were classroom focused, practical in nature, and easy to implement. They also valued the modeling of effective teaching by certain instructors. Consistent with research findings on modeling, those instructors who chose to model announced before teaching episodes those behaviors and techniques that were to be used, called attention to them during use, and then facilitated a debriefing session to assess their teaching effectiveness. In cases in which team teaching occurred, instructors would assume peer critiquing roles to demon-

strate certain techniques and behaviors (Showers, 1985).

On the job, interns identified the special guidance and support provided by school administrators, teacher-mentors in individual schools, and university supervisors as invaluable. The process provided interns with weekly dialogues, frequent observations and feedback sessions, some demonstration teaching, and general socio-emotional support. These structures also provided the intern professionals support in their "rites of passage" (Maeroff, 1988).

These structures provided feedback, motivation, and objectivity. The teacher-mentor complemented the administrative support and provided yet another special peer relationship to be formed. When face-to-face contact was not possible, e-mail telementoring encouraged weekly personal dialogues between interns and their university supervisors (also functioning as mentors) who were based at the degree-sponsoring university.

All of this contributed to the building of a professional theory of action (Argyris & Schon, 1987). Interns learned to be more thoughtful, to be more questioning, and to test assumptions; in short, to become lifelong learners. So the impact of their journeys appears to have transcended the level of mastering teaching skills or, for that matter, of becoming professionals. Their journeys were more of a personalized course for developing personal power and fulfillment. They were able to view hindrances, problems, and even failures as opportunities and make use of their personal strengths, wisdom, and faith.

The secret is in the journey itself. With the hero's attitude towards resolving challenges, [one] can use everything that happens to [one] in life as a lesson to move [one] more deeply into the flow of creativity and all its benefits.... Being a hero is about being committed to the journey of life in the highest possible sense.... It is about discovering our human divinity, that powerful, creative source that we each have within us and living by it. (Catford & Ray, 1991, pp. 4-5)

Herein lies the core value of the ACE experience.

What are the implications for teacher educators? As we search for efficacious curricula and methods to prepare preservice teachers for their first year of teaching, we have learned once again that learning the craft is not merely a matter of course mastery, NCATE-focused standards, or addressing state certification standards. Neither is it a matter of providing often-contrived field experiences that include multiple actors, all well-meaning, but frequently not collaborating as a team of professionals with the teacher intern at the center of their work.

We must look more toward the composite of experiences and program structures that are necessary to support and embrace the novices and their ensured success. The starting point for conceptualizing and designing these experiences is with the teacher intern. A constellation of connected experi-

ences needs to be created which must be carefully nested in new program structures that move the interns from the college classroom to their own P-12 classroom in seamless and integrative ways. We must focus on the teacher intern's development of meaning, from the inside out rather than from the outside (i.e., institution) in.

This, then, is the new professional learning community for teacher interns. It is a corps of committed veteran professionals who work as a collegial team representing higher education and the P-12 arena, who are learners themselves, and who will not fail the novices or become isolated as the novices embark on their professional journey. Present structures must be replaced with those that facilitate the development of these learning communities. Once again, as is true of so many traditional programs, structures, and processes, a new paradigm must be created that moves from fragmentation and narrowness to one that is integrative and collaborative and includes support networks of flow and energy. It must be one that embraces and supports new professionals so that their torch is lit and continues to burn as an inspiration to youth. Do we have the commitment and daring to invent these new professional learning communities at the beginning of the millennium?

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