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A PDS Development Module for Positively In fluencing Student Teachers' Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to further understand and explore ways in which the teaching practice of student teachers in junior high school classrooms might foster their teaching development. The study examined student teachers' confidence in relation to effective lesson planning and the improvement of their teaching practice. The research design is a qualitative comparative case study of two yearly practical training courses taught by the author.

Both courses were delivered in a junior high school setting within the framework of the professional development schools (PDS) teaching training practice. In each course there were twelve student teachers who taught in two different teacher training frameworks. The first group (Module A) of twelve teacher trainees taught English as a foreign language (EFL) to a range of levels (seventh, eighth or ninth grade) once a week. The second group (Module B) taught EFL to one classroom level, either seventh, eighth or a ninth grade once a week. In other words, the first group taught three different levels and three different classes whereas the second group taught the same level and the same class. Data sources included student evaluations, teacher observations, group discussions, mentor feedback, a communicative group discussion app, and student teachers' self-reflections. By comparing the teaching experiences

of the two groups, the research indicated that: (1) Student teachers' confidence was higher in Module B's training program than in Module A's training program; (2) There was heightened confidence in relation to effective lesson planning and the improvement of student teachers' teaching practice in Module B. The latter suggested that Module B's training program was more effective than Module A's training program.

Introduction

The improvement of student teachers' teaching practice is directly linked to confidence. Quigley (2016) states that the lessons of teachers with low confidence can unravel. As a result, pupils misbehave and teachers have less successful teaching practices. The present research attempts to understand ways in which student teachers' confidence could be raised in order to teach effectively. During the past ten years a great number of articles published in Teaching and Teacher Education have shown interventions designed for teachers, by teachers and researchers with teachers aimed at their professional learning, with a highlighting impact on teacher and student changes. They cover different geographical regions and varying research and development procedures. This study explores whether critical awareness of classroom levels and learning styles enables student teachers to improve their lesson planning and effective teaching skills. Student teachers' awareness of the levels and learning styles of the classes they teach should help them create suitable and relevant lesson plans that meet the needs of their learners. Thus, the teaching experience of student teachers can be more effective and they gain more confidence.

Background information about the professional development schools (PDS) program

In 1978, Professional Development Center (PDC) programs were established to promote elementary teacher education at the University of Utah (Nutting, 1982). PDC programs create environments in which preservice teachers (student teachers), practicing teachers (mentors), college faculty

(pedagogical advisors), and pre k- 12 pupils all become a part of a community to enhance the level of learning in school settings (Kochan & Kunkel, 1998; Nelson, 1998). The aim is to help connect schools and universities with the help of a facilitator teacher whose primary responsibility is mentoring and guiding teacher trainees, but who also has responsibilities for developing the advancement of in-service teachers. Through this partnership between schools and teacher preparation programs, six principles were recognized (Nelson, 1998):

High Quality Professional Preparation: Providing a model for professional preparation and development programs for public school educators. This model demonstrates teaching for understanding.

Simultaneous Renewal: Organizing the school and its classrooms as a community of learning by creating strong partnerships among universities, schools, and professional organizations and associations.

Equity, Diversity, Cultural Competence: Enabling these learning goals for everybody's children by recruiting, organizing, and supporting faculty and students who reflect and comprehend the associations' diverse cultural perspectives in the country and global community.

Scholarly Inquiry and Programs of Research: Conducting and distributing educational research and engaging in other academic actions that develop awareness, advance teaching and learning for adults and youth.

School and University-Based Faculty Development: Delivering high quality professional educational programs for development of learning for adults and youth by making reflections and inquiry a fundamental feature of the school.

Policy Initiation: Being involved in policy examination and development related to public K-12 schools and the planning of educators. Supporting policies that advance teaching and learning for all students, stimulating school enhancement and improving the preparation and continuing professional development of all educators. By doing so, a new structure for the school development is achieved.

Focusing on student teacher needs, university and school faculty ac-knowledge that the learning process must occur in a real-world setting. By creating the ability to produce new knowledge, school–university partner-ships are developed to elevate learning. PDS partners agree to be organized in order to forefront the needs of pupils.

The Link between Teachers' Confidence and Teaching

Effective lesson planning in the classroom has always been a concern, not only for student teachers, but also for practicing teachers (Skowron, 2015; Fautley, and Savage, 2013). Effective lesson planning also helps teach-ers manage their classes more successfully by maintaining classroom man-agement (Swinson, Woof, and Melling, 2003; Chen, McCray, Adams, et al, 2014). This study will explore how the teaching training practice (TTP) of the PDS program can minimize the concern student teachers have about effec-tive lesson planning and improve their teaching skills through the comparison of PDS Modules A and B. The different organizational aspects of these two groups offer an opportunity to compare self-perceptions of student teachers' confidence, effective lesson planning and the improvement of their teaching practice.

Purpose

The purpose of presenting and comparing the two PDS modules A and B is to further understand how student teachers' confidence is positively influ-enced by raising their awareness of the classroom level and learning styles in the class or classes they teach. By critically taking into consideration the dif-ferent learning styles and levels, student teachers focus on learners and ways to create suitable and relevant lesson plans that meet the needs of their learn-ers in terms of effective teaching and lesson planning. Awareness of different learning styles bridge the gap between student teachers knowledge and their pupils' prior experiences. Schmeck (2013) clearly states that '' student learn-ing […is…] firmly rooted in the students' own experiences ''(p.22).When stu-dent teachers take into consideration the level and different learning styles of

the classes they teach, this helps them motivate and engage learners. Motivation is a key component for effective lesson planning (Courey, Tappe, Siker, and LePage 2012). McNally et al. (2005) indicate that most beginners are looking for ''practical things that will work in the short term as one of their main objectives... [so that they can]…get order in order to teach'' (p. 180). In Module A, student teachers expressed the necessity and need to know more information about their pupils' learning styles and levels to prepare more effective lesson plans. Their reflections about their teaching skills did not meet their expectations of being confident student teachers. The development of Module B aimed at improving student teachers' teaching practice which would eventually lead to enhancing their confidence. Module A students taught different classes and different levels throughout the TTP yearly course. On the other hand, Module B students were provided with the opportunity to teach the same class and same level every week throughout the TTP yearly course.

The study

These data was drawn from discussions, reflections, and feedback assessments of student teachers' reflections during the 2014- 2016 academic years. The study looks at how those student teachers developed their understanding of the level and learning styles which nurtured their teaching and confidence during their PDS training course program and how they integrated what they had learned from their education courses. Their reflections and discussions about their own teaching experiences and how they felt were instrumental for further insights. The study also examines if, and in what ways, this increased confidence allowed them to improve their teaching. Furthermore, the contribution of the logistical aspect of teaching the same class level over a period of time as opposed to different class levels improved student teachers classroom management skills. This was done through the student teachers' self-reflecting on their teaching experiences. Greenman and Dieckman (2004, p. 241) highlight the importance of an ''ongoing process of self-examination and reframing'' in which student teachers are exposed to real world settings for extended understanding of how to plan and implement effective lesson plans.

The School Settings

The participating schools are both large, junior high schools located in Taibe in the center of Israel (Triangle area). Taibe is a relatively big city with a fast-growing population of middle-class Arab Muslims. During the years of PDS participation, the teaching staff in both schools were generally young, passionate, and relatively new to the profession, although some were experienced teachers who had taught for many years. Many of these teachers were graduates of The Arab Academic Institute of Education of Beit-Berl College and quite a few of these teachers had pursued higher degrees. Both school populations were predominantly heterogeneous. Both schools are located in working-class urban areas that identify and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse school population. Both schools have participated in the PDS program over the past ten years.

Components of the PDS Program in This Study

College Faculty's (pedagogical advisor) Role

The pedagogical advisor in both schools is the author of this article and mediator between the schools and The Arab Academic Institute of Education of Beit-Berl College.

College Practicing Teachers' (mentors) Role

The mentor's role in the PDS program is to guide, monitor, assist and partially evaluate the progress of the teacher trainees through observations, in-school discussions, meetings and sometimes phone calls or through text messaging systems.

Student teachers

The student teachers were students who underwent a training workshop where they practiced teaching strategies and practically implemented theoretical strategies that they studied at The Arab Academic Institute of Education of Beit-Berl College.

Pupils (EFL Junior High School Learners)

The pupils were Arab Muslims who learned English as a foreign language. The classes were heterogeneous with an average of 35-40 mixed-gendered pupils in each class.

Research methods and procedure

The First Group (Module A):

This group taught English as a foreign language to a range of three different classroom levels once a week over a range of about 20 weeks (Seventh, eighth or a ninth grade). The practical training program took place every Wednesday from 7:45- 13:30. During this time, teacher trainees observed lessons, worked on school projects with pupils, taught and had reflective sessions with their mentors. Module A students taught one lesson each week in either a seventh, eighth or a ninth grade classroom.

The Second Group (Module B):

This group taught English as a foreign Language to one classroom level once a week over a range of about twenty weeks (Either seventh, eighth or a ninth grade). The practical training program was every Wednesday from 7:45- 13:30. During this time, teacher trainees also observed lessons, taught lessons and had reflective sessions with their mentors and pedagogical advisors. Module B students taught one lesson in the same class each week that was either a seventh, eighth or a ninth grade class. The student teachers observed other classroom levels of seventh, eighth and ninth grade levels but did not teach them

Participants

The twenty -four participants in this research are Arab teacher trainees in their early twenties in the second year of their practical teacher training program. The majority of the participants come from Arab towns/villages in the triangle region and a few come from the north. All the teachers are female Muslims from conservative and less conservative communities. The teacher trainees in both groups underwent a first year PDS practical training course and experienced teaching and observing lessons with elementary levels. The participants were all students in the English Department at the Arab Academic Institute of Education at Beit-Berl College.

Research questions

(1)   What is the contribution of the PDS Module A program compared to the PDS Module B Program to the student teachers' confidence?

(2)   What is the contribution of the PDS Module A program compared to

the PDS Module B Program to the student teachers' effective lesson planning and improvement of teaching skills?

Hypotheses

(1) The contribution of the PDS Module B program would be higher than the PDS Module A program to the student teachers' confidence.

(2) The contribution of the PDS Module B program would be higher than the PDS Module A program to the student teachers' effective lesson planning and improvement of teaching skills.

Research design and data collection

The design of the study was a qualitative comparative case study (Drozdova and Gaubatz 2016) of the two teacher training Models A and B courses taught by the author of this paper. Both groups participated in the PDS teacher training program at the Arab Institute of Beit Berl College. Data collection relied on interviews and group discussions, observations, mentor reflections, a communicative group discussion app and student teachers' self-reflections.

Interviews and Group Discussions

Eliciting direct answers, reactions, reflections and discussing interviewees' thoughts and opinions were central for the researcher's further understanding (Seidman 1991). Both practical PDS teaching programs, Module A and Module B, included one hour during the practical workday for a group meeting in which student teachers, mentors and the pedagogical advisor met to discuss issues concerned with teaching and methodology. In addition, a communicative group discussion app was created to enable student teachers, mentors and the pedagogical advisor to share, discuss and exchange ideas relevant for teaching.

Observations

Observing the teacher trainees during lessons was a good opportunity to learn about the matters that had been raised by the student teachers and the progress they had made in perspectives of effective lesson planning and the improvement of student teachers' teaching practice and the correlation to student teachers' confidence. During observations, the focus was on the notion of the student teachers' delivery and teaching of the lesson. The observer concentrated on the student teacher's ability to present and smoothly transi-

tion from the opening of the lesson to the closure of the lesson. After each teaching experience, the author and the student teacher discussed the goals of the lesson, the lesson demonstration and the feelings of the student teacher after teaching the lesson.

Mentor Feedback

Written reflections were used as the basic analytical tool in this study. After each taught lesson, student teachers received oral and written feedback from their mentors about their teaching performance.

Student Teachers' Self Reflections

Teacher trainees wrote a self-reflection addressing issues they encountered while planning (communicating with mentors) and teaching; they reflected about their emotional feelings as well. The reflections were analyzed on the basis of what these future teachers understood about effective lesson planning and the improvement of their teaching practice and the correlation to confidence.

Communicative App (WhatsApp)

Influenced by recent means of technology , the integration of a communicative group discussion app was also used as a vital tool to collect data. Accordingly, a WhatsApp group was created to assist teacher students with effective lesson planning, to discuss teaching strategies, and for sharing teaching experiences (written forms, audio recordings and vidoes). The WhatsApp app also enabled the student teachers to observe videos of themselves and other student teachers while teaching and learn more about effective teaching through critically discussing aspects of planning a lesson and practical teaching.

Qualitative results

Trainees' confidence

The author monitored the process of the participants' weekly teaching experiences for the duration of twenty weeks. Based on the journal excerpts and communicative app discussions, the teacher trainees' reflected about their confidence and feelings after their teaching experiences. They answered the following questions each time they taught a lesson: How did you feel while teaching the lesson? How do you feel after the lesson? If you teach the lesson

again, what things will you keep and what things will you drop? Why? Please explain your answer. Did you achieve your goals, if so, how?

The following entries by different student teachers have been selected as representative of the journal reflections and communicative app discussions.

In the Lesson Reflections from the Module A Program. Some Student Teachers Wrote

- ✓ *…but despite the noise I managed to teach…*
- ✓ *I felt that the students did not understand the instructions.*
- ✓ *The learners were not cooperating even though I prepared a very interesting lesson.*
- ✓ *It was difficult to plan an effective lesson that met the needs of the different learning styles.*
- ✓ *…some pupils took advantage of my presence and thought this lesson was not an actual English lesson.*
- ✓ *The opening took too much time as I needed to explain the instructions more than twice…it was a good activity but only a few pupils were participating.*
- ✓ *The activity I prepared was too difficult and did not meet the level of the pupils.*
- ✓ *Unfortunately, a lot of time was wasted and I did not achieve the goal of the lesson.*

In The Final Yearly Reflection of the Module A Program. Some Student Teachers Wrote

- ✓ *…it was difficult to memorize the students' names.*
- ✓ *…I felt that I needed more time to know the level of the students more.*
- ✓ *… I did not feel like a teacher, I was trying to control the class to teach but I felt that I did not build a teacher-student connection with the classes I taught because I taught a different class every three or four weeks. Sometimes the classes went on trips or there were certain events at the school that took place during my teaching lesson.*
- ✓ *… I wish if I could teach the same class every Wednesday to know the learners more and prepare appropriate materials according to their different learning interests*
- ✓ *… every week I had a different mentor and it was very difficult to plan lessons with them or get feedback from them… sometimes I did not know what I needed to improve and how. Each mentor had a different strategy …*

In the Lesson Reflections from the Module B Program. Some Student

Teachers Wrote

✓   *My teaching experience this Wednesday was successful as I managed time more effectively than last week's lesson.*

✓   *The planning of my lesson was carefully and effectively demonstrated as I divided certain tasks according to the levels of the pupils.*

✓   *The pupils were active and even those who were less advanced tried to participate by using some Arabic.*

✓   *I managed to achieve the goals of my lesson and this was demonstrated during the closure of the lesson when pupils presented …*

✓   *The transition from one activity to another was smooth and time was not wasted.*

✓   *Time management was effectively managed in today's lesson.*

✓   *I managed to control the class by preparing relevant material that met the interests of my pupils whom I learn more and more about each Wednesday.*

In the final Reflection of the Module B Program Some Student Teachers Wrote

✓   *…I had the ability to learn more about my pupils.*

✓   *… I really felt confident and excited about teaching the same class every week.*

✓   *… I really liked it when pupils knew my name and met me outside the classroom and talked about themselves.*

✓   *…I managed to memorize the names of the pupils and call on them during lessons…. This strengthened my presence in the classroom and I felt like a real teacher*

✓   *… It was difficult to adjust at the beginning but I developed and learned more about teaching as I tried different teaching strategies that I built according to the class level.*

✓   *… my mentor was easy to approach and helped me when I needed assistance.*

✓   *… my mentor monitored my development and provided advice when needed.*

✓   *I managed to prepare effective lesson plans that meet the needs and interests of my pupils.*

Awareness of the classroom level and learning styles

The program was divided into two stages: observation and practice. First, in both Modules students were required to observe and perform observational tasks before they started to actually teach their classes. This helped them study the level of the classes they would be teaching. For example,

they were required to gather information about the pupils' level of English, learning abilities and to some extent background information about pupils with special needs. During the first stage of observations, student teachers in both modules A and B observed the classes they were expected to teach for a range of five to seven lessons. The observational tasks were aimed at exposing the student teachers to the classroom culture in terms of motivation, learning styles, setting, seating, and level. Student teachers in both Modules A and B gathered significant information about the classes they were going to teach. After the observation period, student teachers began to teach the classes they had observed.

Once Module A and B teacher trainees began to teach, significant differences were found in terms of adjustment and needs of the classes they taught. Module A student teachers found it more difficult to adjust to three different classes as they were teaching the same class again only once a month. On the other hand, Module B student teachers managed to demonstrate a faster adjustment in the same classroom level they taught. Mentors and the pedagogical advisor monitored the process and the importance of student teachers' awareness of level and learning styles. Module B student teachers showed that their awareness of the classroom level and learning styles contributed to preparing more successful lesson plans that were also delivered more successfully.

Student teachers in both groups reflected about their teaching experiences of teaching the same class level or a different class level each week. In their reflections, they related to the following questions: Did you manage to have rapport with your pupils? Were you aware of most of your pupils' names? Did you manage to plan your lessons according to the interests of your pupils? Were your pupils motivated during your lessons? Do you think you met the needs of your learners and that you have achieved the lesson goals you usually set for your classroom. Module B student teachers wrote more positive insights about their teacher- student relationship. For example, one of them wrote

I really liked to read and correct my pupils' projects or homework…

Teaching the same pupils every week made me feel like an actual teacher… My pupils were eager to finish games, activities and tasks during my lessons… My pupils got used to me and considered me as their actual teacher… It was a very good idea to have us teach the same class every Wednesday and the role of becoming a teacher in the classroom became easier and I believe I have greatly developed my teaching skills by gaining more confidence. Every lesson gradually became more successful and my teaching experiences were very enjoyable…. My pedagogical advisor's critical feedback and very constructive feedback helped me develop and progress…Sometimes our pedagogical advisor filmed us while teaching a whole lesson or a certain activity and then discussed aspects my teaching experience through a WhatsApp group with me and my peers… I believe the WhatsApp group was a great idea for me, my peers, and pedagogical advisor to discuss ideas about teaching and share successful tips or short videos from our practical teaching experiences… The shared successful or unsuccessful experiences encouraged me to teach more confidently and most importantly to learn how to improve my teaching skills by knowing more and more about my pupils every Wednesday.

Conclusion

By comparing the teaching experiences of the two groups of student teachers in Module A and B, the research showed that: (1)The contribution of the PDS Module B program was greater than the PDS Module A program for the student teachers' confidence. (2) Student teachers' effective lesson planning and teaching skills in PDS Module B was better than the PDS Module A program.

The student teachers' confidence in the PDS Module B program increased their confidence as practicing teachers due to their better awareness of the different learning styles and classroom levels. This helped them plan suitable and relevant lessons that met the needs of the classes they taught whereas Module A student teachers faced difficulties preparing relevant and suitable lessons that met the needs of their learners. This negatively influenced and affected their confidence. Module B student teachers improved their teaching strategies in a shorter period of time as their awareness of the classroom level

greatly contributed to their teaching skills.

Conducting follow-up research

Based on the significant differences between the two Modules A and B, there is a need to conduct another research study to examine the correlation between the student teacher's critical thinking about effective teaching and planning. It is even advisable to examine in depth the ways of how recent communicative Apps such as WhatsApp that may help pedagogical advisors and student teachers in terms of organizing teaching schedules , preparing relevant materials and sharing teaching experiences that could help student teachers become confident fit future teachers.

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