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2018

Book Review: *Transforming Teacher Education*

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Running head: DURR BOOK REVIEW

Transforming Teacher Education
BOOK REVIEW

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Introduction

Transforming Teacher Education: Reflection from the Field provides an in-depth look at how Michigan State University (MSU) reformed their teacher education program over a ten year period. This case-study “aims to advance our conversation about what quality teacher education looks like and why it is hard to create.”

Chapter one begins with some background on MSU’s history of reform in teacher education. Specifically the chapter focuses on the work of Judy Lanier, dean of the College of Education during the 1980s. Lanier’s idea for working effectively in a large institution was to think small. She created four small thematic teacher preparatory programs apart from the mainstream program. Each thirty student cluster had a specific area of focus, they were: heterogeneous classrooms, academic learning, learning community, and multiple perspectives. Lanier’s concepts quickly gained acceptance and she began meeting with deans from other leading research universities. These meetings evolved into the Holmes Group, “a leading organization in the reform of teacher education during the 1980s and 1990s.”

By the early 1990s Lanier succeeded in making more large scale changes at MSU with the movement to five-year program that included a year-long internship for all teaching candidates. Lanier’s small four team model was expanded to include all the teaching candidates. The candidates were randomly assigned to one of three groups (later a fourth group of only secondary teaching candidates emerged). This book focuses on the work of one of these clusters entitled, Team One. Team One was lead by Sharon Feiman-Memser and Jay Featherstone and their democratic ideals of education are apparent throughout the book. In particular, Team One’s embracement of small learning

communities, reflection based reform, and a year-long field placement program were among their most significant accomplishments.

Small Learning Communities

MSU's reform movement attempted to break the large teacher preparatory program into smaller more effective teams. This reform seems to parallel the reform of K-12 schools. There is a movement to creating smaller schools or smaller schools *within* current larger schools. These smaller learning environments are more beneficial to both students and teachers. The federal government has also gotten on board with the smaller learning communities push by awarding over \$100 million in grant money (Lee & Ready, 2007).

MSU's program design exposed prospective teachers to these new types of schools by designing a preparatory program that mirrored their student's actual future working environments. These smaller communities made it easier for faculty and staff to collaborate and also streamlined the communication between students, faculty, and staff.

Reform and Reflection

The collaborative nature of Team One lead to productive reflection and reform. Over a period of ten years the program improved and successful initiatives were expanded effectively.

Chapter three addressed Team One's professional standards and their development. A subheading contained in the chapter entitled "Drafting (and Redrafting) Program Standards" shows Team One's commitment to reflective practice. The Democratic ideals of Dewey were cited as being very influential in the development of their standards. Dewey's ideas are cited often throughout the book providing more

evidence to his influence on Team One growth and development. This book explains the importance of not just creating standards but insuring they have “real meaning” and passing that meaning on to the candidates.

In chapter four Helen Featherstone provided an intimate look at her reflective practices in teaching an introductory mathematics methods course. Featherstone acknowledges that “many prospective teachers bring to their teacher preparation courses a history of negative experiences with school mathematics, deep doubts about their ability to make sense of it, and considerable apprehension about teaching it.” In looking back at her reflective journal writings, Featherstone saw two major themes she wanted to expose her students too: play and curiosity. The chapter goes on to explain how Featherstone integrated these ideas into her course. She attributes much of the success of the course to her first class, in which, she took her students to observe an urban elementary teacher doing a mathematics lesson. Featherstone closes her chapter with a dissection of what she learned during her mathematics methods course. She used Dan Hawkins philosophy of the “triangular relationship between I, Thou, and It: the teacher, the student, and the curriculum” to conceptualize her experiences. She envisioned her triangular relationship as a balance between herself, her students, and reform in the mathematics teaching.

The commitment to reflection and continuous improvement is often seen in this book through the collaborative efforts of the faculty and staff.

The book explains how the year-long internship “served as a pressure cooker for intensifying” the candidates emotions. In particular, in the case of student teachers and their collaborating teachers working so close together for an entire school year. Effective

communication and collaboration helped Team One build a strong network of effective mentor teachers to work with the student teachers. Chapters seven, eight, nine provided detailed explanations of how these networks were built and maintained.

In chapter seven the authors spoke about the Teacher Education Circle at one school location. In chapter nine David Carroll describes the mentor teacher study group that took place at another field location. This group used some of the successful ideas from the Teacher Education Circle. For example, mentor teacher saw planning as a weakness in their student teachers, so they used some of their meeting time to address how to develop the planning skill of their student teachers. The study group used videotapes of coplanning lessons to critically examine their practices. This type of research based reflective practice was one of the greatest successes in Team One's reform of teacher education.

The author goes on to state that Team One had their share of failures and some of the professional development schools were "flops." But the success in the Teacher Education Circle was the "crown jewel" of Team One and provided a "vision of field-based teacher education that flowed from plural values."

Field Placements

All the positive reforms initiated by Team One culminated during the field placements. It was the description of the year long field placement that was, perhaps, the most effective and interesting concept within this book. Team One's field placement success was achieved because of the aforementioned reflective, collaborative approach to the experience. Team One members supported all stakeholders and worked to improve all areas of the field experience.

Chapter seven provided a description of Team One's role for cooperating teachers. The initial concerns Team One had with their cooperating teachers are summed up in a quote from a cooperating teacher, "I thought my job was to provide a classroom for the student teacher to try out things she had learned at the university. . . I also thought I should watch her teach and tell her what she was doing wrong. But I did not see that as a central role for myself." The chapter details how Team One changed the traditional way of thinking about student teaching as a culminating experience to more of a beginning of learning for a novice teacher. The team strove to construct a learning community between the cooperating teacher, student teacher, and school liaison where all parties learned from each other. Student teaching was viewed as "a time to learn how to think and act like a teacher through coplanning and coteaching." The authors of chapter seven also created a Teacher Education Circle where cooperating teachers meet with each other to address common concerns. This model was highly effective and extended to other schools and demonstrates the previously mentioned commitment to reflective practice.

Chapter eight continues the discussion of Team One's focus on field work. This chapter was written by Patricia J. Norman and explores her experiences as a school liaison. She uses a case study approach to analyze how she worked with a specific student teacher and how she collaborated with other Team One members. This chapter contains a statement that reflects Team One's attitudes on the learning process throughout chapters seven, eight and nine: "Interns were students of teaching. Collaborating teachers were students of mentoring. University liaisons were students of field-based education."

The authors also painted a complete picture and exposed the reader to the pitfalls and challenges of organizing such an intimate collaborative year-long structure.

Problems with teacher turnover and staffing of school liaisons were some of the concerns listed.

Critique and Recommend Usage

To this reviewer *Transforming Teacher Education: Reflection from the Field* provides some sound ideas for teacher education reform. In particular Team One's work in the field. A year-long internship can provide a much richer experience for the candidates. Team One's commitment to collaborating with mentor teachers was the most powerful reform idea. This is often the hope of many programs, but Team One made a serious commitment to making it work. Team One demonstrated that these intimate relationships can be fostered and maintained even in a large university setting. Getting the candidates field experience is import, but Team One's ability to create a strong triad of university, school, and candidate has benefits above and beyond what is listed in the this book.

This reviewer would recommend this book to deans or administrators looking to reform their teacher preparatory programs. The depth of the analysis into MSU program provides descriptions that are specific enough for one to implement them directly into their program. As previously mentioned the strongest component of Team One's reform was in their year long internship and the collaboration on how to get the most out of that year. Anyone looking for ideas on how to reform their teacher predation with and the possibility of a year-long internship may find additional information in Linda Darling-Hammond's (2000) *Studies of Excellence in Teacher Education Preparation in a Five-*

Year Program; it describes two teacher preparation programs that both utilize a year-long internship.

At times, *Transforming Teacher Education: Reflections from the Field* loses some of its powerful conceptual ideas in a fragmented presentation. The most powerful ideas in small learning communities, reflective reform, and field experiences are scattered across various chapters written by several different individuals. This reviewer felt the chapters seemed unconnected. The common themes had to be discovered rather analyzed and interpreted.

In closing this reviewer would recommend this book to individuals looking for specific and descriptive ideas on how to reform their teacher preparation programs. Linda Darling-Hammond's text maybe more appropriate for instructors of program development courses because it examines two universities and provides a more broad and diverse set of conceptual program ideas.

References

Darling-Hammond, L (2000). *Studies of Excellence in Teacher Education: Preparation in a Five-Year Program*. New York. AACTE Publications.

Lee, V. E. & Ready, D. D. (2007) *Schools within Schools: Possibilities and Pitfalls of High School Reform*. New York. Teachers College Press.