Mentored Learning to Teach According to Standards-Based Reform: A Critical Review

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For over a century, the majority of American schools have employed teaching methods that have not encouraged students to construct knowledge. Instead, teachers have engaged students primarily with knowledge transmission models of teaching that produce unsatisfactory academic performances. This study examines professional literature as it relates to mentor teachers, novice teachers, and the induction of new standards-based reforms into the classroom.

In composing this literature review, the authors selected literature from three sources: the ERIC database, an annotated mentoring bibliography from Odell & Huling’s (2000) publication on teacher mentoring, and a series of publications from the National Center fro Research on Teacher Learning. Of the 245 position papers, literature reviews, research studies, and reform documents produced by their search, the authors selected 135 from which to glean information.

Initially, this study examines what reformers of education expect novice teachers to learn about teaching and what mentors are expected to know and practice in support of these novice teachers. These expectations call for mentor and novice teachers to focus on making changes in the dominant teaching practices (simple knowledge transmission from a behaviorist perspective where the teacher simply delivers information, the students receive and reciprocate the information back to the teacher). New reform standards of teaching, as called for by education policymakers, strongly encourage changes in teaching that reflect constructive collaboration, active discovery, and problem solving between teacher and student. As Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert (1993) state, the goal of these reforms is to move students beyond the simple memorization of individual and isolated facts, concepts, and theories, to connect students’ learning with their personal experiences and real-life contexts.

Continuing, this study focuses more specifically on the current assumptions of teacher mentoring. The humanistic assumption centers on alleviating the personal problems of novice teachers in order to increase teacher retention. The situated apprentice assumption emphasizes the mentor teacher as a liaison between the school’s culture and the novice teacher, stressing that the mentor convey needed teaching techniques and information to the novice. The critical constructivist assumption encourages novice teachers to act as teacher researchers as they examine existing teaching practices.

Additionally, perceptions of mentoring and teaching held by mentors and novices are examined. Based on their literary review, Wang and Odell concluded “…that neither mentors nor novices generally recognize standards-based teaching as an important goal of learning to teach….” Instead, the popular perceptions of mentoring are centered on the stresses and technical dilemmas of novice teaching, with little attention being given to the proposed reform standards.

Having cited the predominant perceptions of mentoring, Wang and Odell shift their focus to case studies of mentors that were able to influence their novice teachers towards standards-based teaching and away from less effective teaching methods. From these studies, the authors collected positive mentoring practices that include “…engaging novices in reflective interactions, …challenging novices to reinterpret and reconstruct the meanings of crucial events, …modeling the reflective processes necessary to bring out alternative interpretations, …communicating constantly and flexibly with novices about their learning to teach…..”

Based on the positive case studies, Wang and Odell identify three models to assist mentors in developing content and processes for mentoring towards standards-based reform. The knowledge transmission model allows extensive amounts of mentoring knowledge and skills to be conveyed to mentors, relying on the mentors to interpret and assimilate the knowledge into the contexts of their own mentoring contexts. The theory-and-practice connection model connects research related to mentoring and contextualized reflective practice on the part of the mentor, requiring continuous reflection on the part of the mentor as to the most successful mentoring approaches. The collaborative inquiry model suggests that mentoring knowledge be constructed by a community of educators, including novice teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher educators. Finally, the authors suggest that these three models of mentor preparation are most effective when the strengths of the three are integrated into one approach.

Concluding remarks focus on the need for additional research in preparing mentors to support and direct novice teachers as they work to introduce standards-based teaching techniques in the classrooms. Wang and Odell imply that in order to encourage a change in teaching approaches, the processes by which mentors and novices are prepared must undergo additional research and scrutiny.

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