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Final Capstone Reflection

EAD 863 Training and Professional Development

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I. Professional Development in School

I am the Instructional Coach at KIPP Impact Middle School in Jacksonville, Florida. My school is located in an under-resourced community that has been structurally denied access to political, economic, and social capital. My students disproportionately come from single-parent households and an overwhelming majority of them live far beneath America's threshold of poverty. My staff members vary tremendously in years of experience, long term aspirations, and commitments to education. My team represents a number of different ethnicities and while many of us share the cultural background of our students, very few of us can relate to their economic challenges. The entire staff serves nearly three hundred students across fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. Our curriculum offers courses in Reading, Science, Math, Social Studies, Band, and Physical Education. Our school has both an extended school year and an extended school day. For many of our staff members, this experience will be the most challenging and demanding of all of their time spent in education, while it also carries the potential to be the most rewarding. In moving forward, this analysis of both the learners and context must be considered in order to create an accurate and meaningful professional development experience (Dick & Carey, 1996).

In creating development within this context there are multiple aims and purposes which will serve as the epicenter of this dynamic task. Initially, any development offered to educators must address their demands for technical remedies. Due to the influx of innovations emerging in education and the demand to achieve particular results, adults have become conditioned to believe there are techniques, methods, or strategies that can be applied to maximize learning (Cranton, 1996).

While technical abilities may be imperative to creating short term success, this certainly should only serve as the floor of the purposes of development within this context. I believe of even greater importance than technical aims is the deep personal change that initiates “new ways of thinking and behaving” (Kritskaya & Dirkx, 2000). When considering the social and cultural environment of my school, it is fundamental to discover how one’s past has shaped his or her being (Cranton, 1996) so that a new, more critical and liberated self can be born (Freire, 1970). Only when our educational leaders allow themselves to boldly “walk naked into the land of uncertainty” (Quinn, 1996, p. 3) will they gain the perspective necessary to make “learning so accountable, the engagement so meaningful, immediacy so useful” (Vella, 2002) for our nation’s children.

This ability to critically reflect, deeply interrogate, and unapologetically lead is the prerequisite to an effective educational experience in my context. Education in any under-resourced community must recognize and address the lack of capital, whether it be social, economic, or political (Duncan-Andrade, 2008), while the educators embody their roles and responsibilities as being change agents (Cranton, 1996) to transform the world that is, into the world that could be. To this end, the ceiling of the goal of development within this context is for the adults to gain the capacity to control the learning they need to effectively lead within their environment. The pace and direction of this learning will ultimately be determined by their personal needs, along with the needs of their students. It is the responsibility of the administration to support the teachers and students by providing the resources and materials necessary to promote this symbiotic learning experience. This level of accountability and ownership (Gallagher, 2005) can only result from teachers first gaining a deep sense of personal

identity and integrity (Kritskaya & Dirkx, 2000) coupled with connecting their educational experience to the “living core of our students’ lives” (Palmer, 1998, p. 31)

I strongly believe in the context of urban education the aims and purposes of instruction and learning must be grounded in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). Liberation is the most pressing need for the oppressed in disenfranchised communities who have been structurally denied less than the status quo. This struggle for justice and high levels of educational success requires one to march with love and pain (Wild, 1998). Educators must endure the pain of rediscovering themselves to gain the capacity to love those living within the margins of our society, so they may eventually create an educational experience that critiques, builds hope, and institutes action (Duncan-Andrade, 2008).

II. Conceptual and Philosophical Assumptions Guiding Professional Development

No two individuals have the same life experience, and therefore have different frames of reference and understandings as they engage in learning. In addressing any learner, Cranton (1996) argues that their “learning style, teaching style, leadership style, personality characteristics”, in addition to their “values and cultural backgrounds, communities, and educational backgrounds” (p. 120) must serve as the infrastructure to their learning process. Further, to accurately determine why learning has occurred, one needs to look no further than the relationship between the “culture, ethnicity, personality, and political ethos” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 1) of the learner with the content that is being presented. Speaking philosophically, I believe the learner can only perceive learning as necessary, genuine, and meaningful when it is intimately painted within the mosaic tapestry that has evolved into creating the learner’s very *being*.

Jane Vella (2002) warns “only by venturing into the unknown do we enable new ideas to take shape and those shapes are different for each voyager” (p. 158). It is important to note the

experiential element innate to the acquisition of knowledge. I believe this journey into the dark abyss of our very *being* that Vella alludes to, is the prerequisite to the learning which manifests itself through deep reflection. The result of this deep reflection is a transformative experience where knowledge results from answering of critical questions and engaging in consciousness-raising activities (Cranton, 1996). The symbiotic relationship shared between knowledge and reflection must be acknowledged; knowledge cannot be acquired without interrogating our hesitations, doubts, inner discomforts, and uncertainties (Boud & Walker, 1998). Knowledge resides within this venture that Vella presented, where assumptions and beliefs are challenged, and a “deeper awareness and understanding of our selves” is born (Kritskaya & Dirkx, 2000, p. 2). The end result is an emancipated *self* (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

There is “no single theory of adult learning” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 83), but I do firmly believe there are a few cornerstone concepts that are fundamental to how adults learn. First, adults are incredibly busy, always caught in the middle of balancing their personal and professional responsibilities while trying to meet the demands of their lives. Therefore, according to the McClusky’s Theory of Margin, before adults can learn they must have the availability to deeply engage in its processes (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Next, the immediate usefulness of the skills and attitudes that are being grappled with must be immediately recognized for adults to willingly engage in the learning (Vella, 2002). Further, adults must feel safe to embark upon this journey if meaningful learning is to occur. The context must feel safe, participants must feel respected, and there must be the component of trust. Safety essentially stimulates the “creativity, collaboration, and communication” (Vella, 2002, p. 81) that learning depends upon. And lastly, adults benefit tremendously from engaging in the courageous work of learning by collaborating with others (Merriam, Caffarella, &

Baumgartner, 2007). John Dewey believed all authentic learning resulted from experience and, without the support and guidance of others, the rigors of learning may be too heavy of a burden for some to carry. For adults, relationships are foundational to the deep dialogue and sincere listening that creates learning. While there are multiple theories around adult learning and various dynamics that must be considered when focusing on how adults learn, ultimately, I believe it is a process with the above elements serving as its guidelines.

III. Professional Development Framework

Determining the most effective and practical professional development framework in my context is quite challenging. As an instructional coach I am responsible for creating weekly development sessions for the staff, along with what seems to be an endless amount of other administrative responsibilities. So in the interest of working within my rigid amount of planning time and considering the frequency of how often I meet with the staff, the framework that I believe to be the most operative is actually a potpourri of a few key ideas. The foundation to my framework is my ability to be intentional. Robert Branch (2009) defines intentional as “planned, directed, guided, purposeful, defined student-teacher roles, and formal” (p.7). Branch writes extensively on his development framework called “The ADDIE Approach”, but I do not feel the necessary time commitments that this planning process requires would blend well, given the context of my work and my learners. However, I do still believe that I can create a weekly program that is grounded in teacher learning, consisting of both short and long term goals, is systematic, and is heavily influenced by my dispositions around knowledge and adult learning (Branch, 2009). Serving as the compass of my development sessions, along with the device to measure the distance between my teachers’ effectiveness and our school’s “mission, goals, strengths, and priorities” (Queeney, 1995, p. 30) is an effective completion of a needs assessment

- which can be defined as a “process for identifying the gaps, or discrepancies, between what actually is and what ought to be” (Queeney, 1995). My ability to shape an experience that becomes immediately useful for my teachers depends highly on my ability to genuinely listen and authentically explore their wants and needs. Further, all sessions will be governed by objectives which will serve as the pillars to the learning (Silberman, 1998), while all learning will conclude with some variation of assessment to measure whether or not the learning gap has been closed (Branch, 2009).

IV. Professional Development Strategies

The research indicates adults learn best when their unique learning styles are strategically planned for, along with both their cognitive abilities and emotional needs being considered as well (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Presentations and lectures will be included in my development plan in the interest of covering key ideas rather quickly, prompting dialogue, and captivating interest (Cantor, 1992). There will be a heavy emphasis placed upon collaboration. Arguably, some of the most meaningful learning occurs from the dialogue that results from meaningful collaboration (Cranton, 1996). In a school found within my context, the “job they face is too big, is too urgent, and requires too much knowledge for one person or group to do alone” (The Joint Task Force, 1998), so it is imperative for the students’ and community’s success that the staff embodies this “pedagogy of shared responsibility” (Vella, 2002, p. 196). More specifically, this collaboration will manifest itself in the actual professional development sessions, along with holding one other accountable in their execution as they observe each other in their practice. Too often, teachers rarely leave their isolated enclaves; if we expect our students to embody a sense of community, our teachers must first lead the way by setting the example. Additionally, the collaboration will also be noticeable as the school’s entire staff engages in focus groups. This variation of learning carries the propensity to yield the qualitative

data that is often overlooked in addressing the strengths and weaknesses of our students. This will become especially important when it comes to learning about our students as new concepts and approaches are attempted, along with obtaining data around our students' behavioral progress as it relates to the vision of our school (Queeney, 1995). Finally, while there will be individual presentations and collaborative learning opportunities (Silberman, 1998), it will all be grounded in experiential learning. To authentically engage learners, especially adult learners, in real and concrete issues requires substantially promoting the meaningfulness of the learning experience (Kritskaya & Dirkx, 2000). In my context, learning on all levels - from the students to the teachers - must translate itself into action, so it is essential for learners to have the opportunity to engage with conditions that may cause anxiety and be ambiguous in nature. There will be variety of methods to drive the learning of my adult learners and they will be strategically selected to meet the instructional objectives of the learning experience.

V. Evaluation of Professional Development

In the end, the development program will be measured by its impact to create a sense of *being* and *knowing* (Vella, 2002). Not only should this journey equip the adults with what they need to know in order to stimulate a similar sense of *being* and *knowing* in their students, but they also should rediscover themselves as leaders along the way. The greatest indicator of our success will be quantitative and qualitative data drawn from our students (E-Lead, 1997). They ultimately reside at the epicenter of the entire operation. Furthermore, the development is also accountable to making shifts within the entire context of our school, so that the very conditions within the community also begin shifting.

More specifically, the evaluation of my program will be a process (Branch, 2009). Throughout the actual sessions I will be gathering informal and formal data through formative

and summative assessments (Silberman, 1998). The formative data will enable me to adjust the training in real time to better meet the needs of my learners, while the summative data will indicate the degree to which the learning gap that has been closed and will better inform the planning of the next session. It is imperative that prior to the participants leaving the training, I have investigated their “attitudes, knowledge, and skills they acquired” (Silberman, 1998, p. 297). During this evaluation process I will be investigating for gaps in understanding, creating opportunities for participants to evaluate their behavioral and cognitive changes, and personally exploring the behavioral indicators of the participants to assess the effectiveness of the training.

There will also be a great deal of communication between myself, the teachers’ instructional coaches, and the rest of the administration team. This is vital data that I feel should be gathered to determine the behavioral changes that are being made, along with the ultimate results of whether or not the development has been effective.

The effective execution of my evaluation plan should assess the changes made within the participants, the adjustments made within the culture of the school, and the effect on student learning (Cook, 1997). This approach is multifaceted, but only through measuring the professional development with a holistic lens can I draw the data necessary to determine whether or not our educational staff, students, and school are making the progress that our society needs.

VI. Conclusion

Paulo Freire (1970) wrote, “Revolutionary leaders cannot think *without* the people, nor *for* the people, but only *with* the people” (p.131). In order for the social distance that often characterizes the relation between urban schools with their students, families, and communities to be eliminated (Flessa, 2009), the adults must first accomplish this inward journey of critical reflection. The aim of professional development in my context is the deepening of theoretical

understanding and consciousness (Gorski, 2008). The *liberation* of our students will only be accomplished after their educational leaders boldly venture the journey of *emancipating* themselves. Only the *freed* self is capable of unbiasedly teaching, unapologetically leading, and wholeheartedly defending. This is what the children whose lives have been placed within the peripheral deserve; this is what our society is owed.

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