Gradually Increasing Individuality: Suggestions for Improving Alternative Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract
The purpose of this article was to examine the use of a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) embedded in a co-teaching framework (Washut Heck & Bacharach, 2016) during the student-teaching portion of an alternative teaching licensure program. The goal was to improve an already existing student-teacher field experience summer residency program at a large Midwestern university by better attending to its design to help all teachers become better equipped with their selection of teaching strategies.

Background
Once again, the alarms are going off, warning of the growing national teacher shortages and of schools struggling to fill their teacher vacancies. Sutcher, et al. (2016) said, “unless major changes in teacher supply or a reduction in demand for additional teachers occur over the coming years, annual teacher shortages could increase to as much as 112,000 teachers by 2018.

The response has been twofold: 1. States have begun to change the parameters for teacher licensing in an attempt to expedite the process, and enlarge the applicant pool for individuals becoming teachers by removing previous requirements for licensure (Kamenetz, 2014). 2. Universities have begun to increase the availability of “alternative” teacher licensing programs they offer (Aragon, 2016).

Problem
Making teaching a more attractive profession to a wider audience, or lowering the standards to becoming a teacher, might ease fears over classroom shortages in the short term, but “if teachers are hired without having been fully prepared, the much higher turnover rates that result are costly in terms of school budgets and decreases in student achievement” (Sutcher, et al., 2016).

There is a disorienting feeling that comes from teaching teachers to treat their students as individuals, differentiating their instruction for student needs, when pre-service teachers are being trained in a manner that is rooted in the unconscious acceptance of stage developmentalism.

Research Question
How might the theoretical concepts of Gadamer (Fore-meaning) and Bakhtin (Answerability) be used to reconceive the utilization of the GRR model in a co-teaching environment designed to support the growth of preservice teachers?

Emergent Interpretations
Fore-meaning is Contingent (i.e., profoundly contextual and dependent)
• Too frequently programs allow themselves to construct an image of a “normal” preservice teacher in order to create systems of support.
• Programs need to meet each candidate where they are before they start teaching, and begin to form individual plans of support based around them.

The GRR model through a Recursive and Temporal Lens (i.e., occurring over and over in and over time)
• In recognizing the uniqueness of each candidate, programs must take the basic GRR model, and go deeper into what it means to be a teacher by engaging in the act of teaching on a recursive level.
• One possible change programs could make is to be more explicit with candidates when they are being asked to engage in particular aspects of co-teaching. For example, when teacher candidates are primarily observing their cooperating teacher, what exactly are they observing? How are they deciding what to watch, ask questions about, replicate, and challenge in their own future teaching?

Answerability is Relational (i.e., equity is central to supporting growth)
• Lastly, it is not enough to acknowledge the inherent uniqueness in each and every individual, and then continue to design support around a progression of development based on an assumption of universal needs.
• Programs need to place the responsibility for “developmental” support on their ability to interact with each candidate equitably.

Theoretical Framework
Gadamer (1975) wrote about the concept, fore-meaning, as it related to the uniqueness of each individual in making meaning. Gadamer (1975) said, “all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text.”

Bakhtin (1993) wrote about answerability, or the obligated uniqueness each person has to themselves and others. Bakhtin argued, “uniqueness...is compellingly obligated...everyone occupies a unique and never-repeatable place, any being is once-occurent”

Paradigms and Potentials
• Teachers develop and change over time, but this change and development does not occur in universal stages. There is a need to fundamentally change the way programs use the GRR model with co-teaching and pivot from a large scale, universally normed programmatic structure, toward an individualized, responsive, and flexible utilization of GRR.

• University programs need to help foster an increase in individuality by creating spaces that recognize the individual teacher and support the creation of a community of learners who are both living in university teacher education programs, and learning how to support, excite, challenge, and ultimately provide rich educational opportunities of learning for all their students.

• If we truly wish to achieve the promise of equitable educational opportunities for all students, we must not neglect the need for pre-service teachers to also be given an equitable opportunity to develop a pedagogy that represents their uniqueness.

• Teacher preparation programs can create both a structure of support that is embedded with core principles around pedagogy and practice and still be intentional around creating the space that allows for the unknown, never-repeatable moments of individual development to occur.

Educational Importance
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