A collaborative community of school and college educators can blend theory and classroom practice for prospective teachers.

Throughout my career as an educator, I have been fascinated with the paradox faced by beginning teachers as they attempt to secure their first positions. While principals look for candidates with teaching experience, the only way to gain this experience is through teaching. Aside from the traditional eight to 12 weeks of student teaching, and perhaps some additional field experiences, how can a novice close the experience gap?
Part of the problem is that the required courses for prospective teachers are rarely, if ever, connected to authentic school-based experiences. If they teach a lesson in a real classroom, it usually has little connection to the ongoing curriculum or an understanding of student needs and progress.

A Critical Disconnect

New teachers need quality experiences in school, with time to understand the school’s culture, the needs of its students and community, and the scope and sequence of its curriculum (Kosnick & Beck 2003; Polland & Polland 2003). But it is difficult to gain this experience as a full-time college student. One way to accomplish this would be to connect school-based and college-based educators in a collaborative effort. While this seems like common sense, the two faculties responsible for educating new teachers rarely interact in meaningful ways (Perry & Power 2004). Many education professors have classroom backgrounds that are frequently outdated. In addition, many of those who teach education courses are not field supervisors.

Similarly, from the school perspective, administrators and classroom teachers often do not have the necessary background information or time needed to appreciate the knowledge and skills a prospective teacher might bring to their school. Their primary interests (e.g., meeting standards and accountability) are often different from the goals of teacher education programs (e.g., student-centered instruction and authentic assessment).

A Principal’s Solution

As an elementary school principal, I find myself faced with the experience paradox each year. Our school needs teachers who have experience in differentiating the curriculum, teaching integrated, cross-curricular lessons, and preparing a diverse student population for state-mandated achievement tests. However, when I interview teacher candidates, I struggle to find any who are ready to “hit the ground running.” Even if they have studied the skills and strategies necessary to be successful teachers, they have not been given enough opportunities to practice and hone their skills before entering the job market. Thus, they will need to learn on the job, which requires time-consuming staff development and mentoring.

We have found that we can begin closing the experience gap early in new teachers’ careers—even before student teaching—by becoming a professional development school (PDS).

The idea of becoming a “teaching school” arose informally at a meeting between our district superintendent and a chairperson from a local college’s department of education. Our faculty agreed to begin discussions with college faculty and to cultivate a collaboration around two central goals: To participate in the developmental experiences of new teachers, and to work together toward school improvement. From these beginnings, we have successfully collaborated on a number of PDS projects—a mathematics lab, an after-school reading program, assessment practicums, and early childhood enrichment programs—that allowed teachers and college professors to choose their level of involvement and define their roles.

Bridging the Experience Gap

In the first three years, our PDS has begun to close the experience gap for new teachers by providing an authentic setting for new teachers to gain the hands-on experiences essential to beginning careers (McLoughlin & Maslack 2003; Polland & Polland 2003). A major benefit of the PDS has been the opportunity to work with cohorts of college students over time. The students are first introduced to the PDS through a practicum or course-based experience in which they participate in a tutoring, assessment, or collaborative project early in their education studies.

They may then choose to pursue a long-term experience as an unpaid intern. For these, the first semester on site is exploratory and probationary, with emphasis on becoming a member of the school community (McLoughlin & Maslack 2003; Polland & Polland 2003). During this time, the candidates work with several experienced teachers and the college’s PDS liaison professor to decide whether the internship will formally continue the following semester. The part-time internship lasts approximately one year, after which the intern becomes a full-time student teacher for 15 weeks with the same mentor teacher.

After a year and a half of PDS experience, the student teacher is fully immersed in all aspects of the school and prepared to teach under supervision of the PDS faculty, attend staff meetings, participate in staff development activities and parent conferences, and develop a healthy mentor/protegé relationship. The novice is ready to assume full classroom responsibility much sooner than in a traditional student teaching experience.

Another benefit is that prospective teachers can complete some of their education methods classes at the PDS instead of on the college campus. These classes are designed to incorporate hands-on experiences with children in collaboration with school faculty and staff. For example, we established a math lab in our school in which prospective teachers can complete early childhood and elementary math methods courses by tutoring K–5 students in the lab. They also can receive hands-on experience in the areas of reading comprehension (diagnosis and remediation), assessment, and special education collaborations through site-based courses and field experiences at the PDS.

By scheduling after-school courses, the college provides prospective teachers with more time for field experiences during the day, offers school faculty the opportunity to teach at the college level, and allows college professors to serve as classroom teachers.
Thus, the PDS becomes a collaborative effort for everyone to learn more about teaching and learning.

Connecting to Student Learning

Principals are always looking for innovative ways to lower the student-to-teacher ratio in classrooms. Within the PDS, we were able to accomplish this by giving prospective teachers frequent opportunities to work with groups of students needing extra help, remediation, or enrichment, providing classroom teachers more time to differentiate and assess student learning (Fisher, Frey & Farnan 2004; McLoughlin & Maslack 2003).

As new teachers face up to the paradox of needing experience to gain their first teaching positions, the quality of their PDS experience depends on the quality of the collaboration of school-based and college-based mentors who can connect theory, research, and practice in meaningful ways. New teachers need a variety of experiences that are supported by a variety of educators with different roles and responsibilities, but who share common goals.

When a community of educators is actively engaged in the simultaneous education and field-based learning of prospective teachers, the experience gap that new teachers face can be closed. I can say that from personal experience, having recently hired two of our PDS “graduates.”

References


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WEB RESOURCES

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Web site has a link to their PDS standards and assessment process. This link also provides resources for more information about PDS partnerships. www.ncate.org

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) provides professional development school literature, an overview of PDSs, Internet resources, publications, and sample partnership agreements. www.aacte.org
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