

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE, COLLABORATIVE AND INNOVATIVE CLINICAL PRACTICE FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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ABSTRACT

Due to sweeping educational reforms and the era of innovation and research, there has been a global paradigm shift regarding teacher preparation and education programs. This is particularly the case in the United Arab Emirates, where there has been a call for reform to teacher education programs due to the following: UAE Vision 2021, Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, the implementation of teacher licensing and credentialing, and the overhaul of curriculum and instruction. Future teachers are being prepared in teacher education programs to be culturally responsive and classroom ready. Cultural responsiveness is imperative as Emirati school children are often taught by non-Emirati teachers who are new to the region and cultural context. As a result, the aims of teacher training programs have shifted focus, with innovation and collaboration as the main drivers. This report discusses this shift and highlights various approaches of a teacher education preparation program within the United Arab Emirates.

Keywords: Cultural Responsiveness, Collaboration, Innovation, Teacher Education, Teacher Preparation

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative, innovative and international approaches in teacher education and preparation, is timely, as it addresses the need to focus on international research on pre-service teacher education. Exploring research through an international lens, is important for understanding the evolving nature of teacher education in a multitude of contexts. Additionally, an intentional effort to avoid reinforcing a euro-centric worldview is imperative. Contextual considerations and societal factors such as governmental structures, education policies, cultures, and norms often make generative teacher education practices in one country less effective in others. However, they also make them different, diverse and worth exploring. The aim of this research is to explore the presence of these factors that engender cultural and creative responses from both teacher educators and teacher education programs in the United Arab Emirates.

Instituting a Vision Underpinned by Cultural Context and National Priorities

The U.A.E. is an industrious, multinational, multiethnic and multicultural country with national priorities and agendas. While Arabic is the official language (Alghizzawi et al., 2018; Alshurideh, 2018), learning English is an outcome of most P-12 schools and tertiary institutions. The United Arab Emirates (“Vision 2021, National Agenda of the United Arab Emirates,” n.d.), United in Ambition and Determination; includes vital objectives and an agenda, which requires a world-class education system, responsive to national needs. With the advent of providing high quality education, inclusive education, and supporting the learning experiences of special needs children, known in the UAE as “people of determination”, teacher preparation programs are aligned to the UAE Vision 2021, United in Ambition and Determination. The teacher preparation program honors the country’s vision and national

agenda, which heralds a first-rate education as the core of its foundation. Additionally, in light of Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, another national priority, with initiatives that promote innovation, economic development towards the 4th industrial revolution and globalization, there are clear indicators and descriptors for professional teaching requirements (Dhabi, 2008). Curriculum monitoring agencies, along with the Ministry of Education are liaising and collaboratively working with higher education institutions to address needs and requirements (The Ministry of Education Strategy 2010-2020, 2010). Institutions across the country are concerned with teacher effectiveness, and how schools experience increased or decreased levels of student attainment (O'Sullivan, 2015). Other concerns include how students perform in terms international benchmarks, and standards, and if they will be able to compete and contribute to society and in the international arena.

Delineating a Theoretical Perspective to Guide Practices

Quality based and effective teacher preparation programs that promote teacher candidates to experience the interconnectedness between theory and practice, along with reflective practice simultaneously in their field experiences is critical. Tertiary institutions are entrusted to offer programs that prepare teachers as future leaders and curriculum innovators. In the era of innovation, contemporary education and schooling in the region, requires that higher education prepares teachers to become knowledge engineers who design robust, authentic and student-centered activities, facilitate knowledge, and support students in critical learning experiences while promoting opportunities for learning. Teachers are expected to support student learning by facilitating meaningful experiences (Bransford, 2005). Narrowing the curriculum, cultural and achievement gaps; have become a nuance and impetuses for reform. Towards that end, pre-service field experience models and frameworks are evolving.

Delineating a Conceptual Perspective and Practical Framework

Teacher preparation paradigms are shifting as a result of data yielded from various studies and projects. Conversations around accreditation and quality assurance are eminent. Discourse around teacher education and preparation in the United Arab Emirates have also shifted in recent years (Thomas, 2010). The foci of topics are around the importance of pre-service teachers being prepared to deliver and implement the curriculum, to be classroom ready and able to meet the demands of 21st century teaching and learning along while promoting national priorities and initiatives. Towards that end, the College of Education (COE) at Zayed University (ZU), has been considered a premier teacher education preparation program in the region, to obtain National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation now known as the Council Accreditation for Education Preparation (CAEP). The conceptual framework for the COE teacher preparation program required by CAEP, was one approach to a vision for teaching and learning to teach (Sowa, 2016). "Coming together to learn, educate and learn", is a framework illustrative of the importance of honoring vision. It includes an innovative thinking design for leading, teaching and approaching learning. Consequently, the COE at ZU adapted and reframed its cohesive framework to represent embracing a spirit of diversity in the Arabian Gulf culture and to align with global initiatives and national priorities in particular (Sowa et al., 2016).

Situating Clinical Experiences in Deliberative, Purposeful and Cultural Contexts

Field experience opportunities are aligned to the diverse cultural contexts of schools in the U.A.E. The College of Education at Zayed University is intentional and deliberate in preparing teachers to enter classrooms as knowledgeable and capable practitioners who embrace their role to support diverse learners (Sowa et al., 2016), Candidates are also expected to responsibly promote national agendas and priorities around education. This emergent

aspect along with ensuring that pre-service teachers meet national teacher licensing and qualification requirements, are levers that promote situating clinical experiences in unique, deliberative and purposeful contexts. It is also a basis for contextualizing strategies and approaches of teacher education programs across the UAE. It is essential to teacher candidate development that a range of field experiences be offered to pre-service teachers. Experiencing a community of practice through teaching opportunities in multiple contexts and in culturally diverse classrooms is critical (Warner & Hallman, 2017). Pre-service teachers in the UAE develop their pedagogical skills and content knowledge in public schools in which case most of the teachers are Emirati, Arab or of Middle Eastern nationalities, with only a few teachers from western cultural backgrounds. Additionally, pre-service teachers develop adaptive capacities and their pedagogy in private schools with support and scaffolding from cooperating teachers who serve as mentors.

Cultural Responsiveness and Global Awareness

Pre-service teachers develop global awareness and cultural responsiveness. They embrace the cultural and ethnic diversity of their mentors and of the international students in their P-12 classrooms that represent various cultural, religious and ethnic groups. In addition to three practicum experiences, the college offers student teaching internships that culminates into experiences that offers candidates to assess their progression of their skills and dispositions and visibly see the impact of their teaching on student learning.

Purposeful Links between Coursework and Clinical Process

At Zayed University, teacher candidates complete coursework and experience a range of field experiences through the collaborative partnerships created *via* the College of Education. Program sequence is organized and arranged in a way, which the clinical process often begins with practicum 1 and ends with a student teaching internship. There has been a substantive emphasis on partnerships between teacher preparation programs and P-12 schools as one of its core standards for program evaluation (CAEP, 2013). Candidates move through the dichotomies of theory and practice, connecting their pedagogy to various contexts, as their field experiences encompasses teaching and learning opportunities in both private and public schools in the UAE.

Candidates collaborate with mentor/cooperating teachers, faculty supervisors and other candidate colleagues as they develop their pedagogy. In addition to this, candidates are encouraged to engage in reflective processes, further their understanding between the relationships of theory to best practices and create their own small “t” theories and visions of good teaching. Emphasis is placed within the college to maintain collaborative partnerships with high performing, accredited schools that work as PLCs, serve as a catalyst and supportive mechanism for candidates to experience authentic and meaningful teaching experiences. Pre-service teachers join and experience a community of practice, which supports their skills and pedagogical development (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Case Studies of Pre-Service Teacher Experiences

According to (Michelli, 2016) there are numerous case studies exploring how and to what extent are pre-service teaching programs committed to producing classroom ready teachers. Questions raised such as should prepare teacher candidates for successful transitions into in-service experiences through adequate coursework, hands-on practice opportunities that are connected to develop necessary competencies and dispositions (Michelli et al., 2016). In a few case studies, it was determined that programs should move towards innovative teacher education modalities providing multiple opportunities for interns to hone their skills, evaluate

and assess their own performance and receive critical and constructive feedback (Allen, 2016; Michelli et al., 2016).

The most widely held view among researchers in various case studies, regarding the effectiveness of pre-service programs centered on the premise that practical experience was preferred to studying theoretical perspectives. However, the reality does not always match with the preparation offered. According to (Bransford et al., 2005), most pre-service teachers expressed that their practicum experience was the most beneficial aspect of their training program (Bransford et al., 2005). It afforded them with more opportunities to improve their teaching skills and achieve classroom-readiness. These teachers asserted that in-school contexts allowed for immersion in the “practical, real and immediate” teaching contexts, whereas the university context was often seen as “theoretical and remote” (Allen, 2009).

Reflections on Clinical Experiences

Upon reflection, as a teacher educator it's plausible that conceptual frameworks for teacher preparation and models of teacher education programs in higher educational institutions (across the UAE particularly) will continue to be re-framed, re-conceptualized and realigned to address evolving contemporary issues, global trends, national priorities. Cultural contexts, the needs and priorities of the region are important to consider in developing conceptual frameworks. Drawing upon my experiences as clinical supervisor (out in the field with practicum students), it is imperative that preparing educators for the 21st century teaching and learning, requires that teacher preparation programs to continuously consider and conceptualize a collaborative and innovative approach to clinical experiences.

FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

Teachers being able to meet the challenges of internationalization, being adaptable and able to contribute to current reform efforts with regards to teaching and learning are a focal point for teacher education programs. These challenges necessitate reconsidering and rethinking how pre-service teachers develop and hone their craft. A growing body of research indicates that there is a critical dilemma in that some pre-service programs do not adequately prepare graduates to be “classroom ready” and this un-readiness transcends into teachers not being ready to teach and students not being ready to learn (Roofe & Miller, 2013). Therefore, the problem unfortunately transfers from pre-service teaching to in-service teaching.

Current research indicates that the implications of students in P-12 schools, not receiving quality base education is often times traced back to the preparedness and effectiveness of teachers. There is no general consensus as to why pre-service programs fall short in teacher preparation; however, surveys of graduates, teachers, principals and education systems suggest that reasons include: lack of practicum; separation of or the inability for pre-service teachers to link theory and practice; transmissive teaching model; lack of accountability; fragmentation of coursework and; lack of collaboration and consultation between university, schools and in-service teachers (Bransford et al., 2005; Roofe & Miller, 2013).

Another question and concern that continues to resurface is whether teacher education graduates can meet professional standards and if they have been properly prepared, rigorously assessed and found to be ready for the classroom (Wyss, 2012). Furthermore, research suggests that in order to determine this effectiveness, this assessment alone cannot be based on praxis or a certificate. According to (Wyss et al., 2012), authentic assessment and measurement of classroom readiness must capture the complex skills, dispositions, content knowledge and adaptive capacities are required for teaching. This comes from pre-service teachers experiencing a solid and effective teacher preparation program.5.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Implementing a culturally responsive, collaborative and innovative model for teacher development and preparation, and one that situates cooperating teachers, faculty supervisors and students in a collaborative experience is an essential shift from traditional paradigms. This is what I consider a “teach me as I teach you”, in some ways this notion could be the makings of a new model. Through collaborative partnerships; teacher candidates would not only learn best practices, they would have opportunities to implement these practices and hone their skills as well. They would use their exposures to different cultures as a means to extend their thinking and develop global, professional practices that are implemented around the world. To extend this even further, would be for teacher preparation programs to promote the co-assessment of clinical experiences and impact on student learning. As a teacher educator I consider this aspect, as being a critical one in preparing teacher candidates in the UAE (especially) to be classroom ready and forward thinking as future teacher leaders.

Further discussion, research and consideration from the other end of the spectrum would be useful and helpful for teacher preparation programs that are making changes and revisions in their programs. In-service teachers could liaise with the colleges they graduated. These teachers could provide an invaluable service back to the profession. For example they could continue collecting and sharing evidences with preparation programs that indicate best or promising practices as they are honing their skills, continue their own learning and furthering the development of their professional craft (Allen, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Examining the capturing of professional evidences, key considerations as well as the perspectives of intern teachers and novice teachers towards “classroom readiness” is essential as the country continues to solidify its goals in retaining and producing high quality educators, student excellence, and achievement. Future creative projects and research that might inform the teacher preparation program at Zayed University, as well as other teacher education programs in the UAE would also support the endeavors mentioned. These include:

1. Action research and creative projects of cooperating teachers with teacher candidates
2. Longitudinal studies on teacher education/preparation programs meeting outcomes of producing trained and qualified teachers that are employed and placed in schools
3. Exploring perspectives and reflections of teacher candidates towards “classroom readiness”.
4. Empirical studies that examine the process of collaborative teachers and clinical supervisors/teacher educators co-assessing field experience with teacher candidates could be insightful.
5. Explorations of Emirati pre-service teachers' perceptions and awareness of their impact on student learning as on-going projects could be of great use in teacher preparation and teacher education decision-making processes.

Collaboration and innovation are two major drivers in our global world and mainstream society. Programs that re-examine approaches, monitor practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of their models and program designs (with this notion in mind), might help meet the demands and needs of preparing future teachers to be ready to successfully enter classrooms. Continued research towards the advancement of teacher preparation programs and the professional preparation of teachers is essential for the United Arab Emirates. Exploring and uncovering aspects of teacher preparation through academic/practicum experiences is critical.

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