Maslow’s Hierarchy Identity Formation

Teacher Identity Formation:
A Case Study of First Year Teachers’ Development Across Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need

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Introduction

First year teachers, entering the teaching profession in the aftermath of No Child Left Behind (Department of Education, 2001), find themselves in a quagmire of mandates, expectations, and perplexity over what defines a teacher. Anxious to fit into teams, meet the mandates of school, district, state, and national testing expectations, while applying the theoretical constructs proffered in teacher preparation programs, teachers new to the profession struggle with identify formation (Laughlin, 2006; Walkington, 2005). Teachers entering the profession with multiple field experiences, theory to practice analysis, portfolio development, and a multitude of other tools, undergo the process of combining the discrete pieces of information and experiences, and shape themselves into unique beings. First year teachers define their own entity within the context of a school culture. This process, known as identity formation, requires a deep understanding of the culture of schooling, self, and how the two combine to form the identity of the first year teacher.

The Professional Development School program, designed to guide pre-service teachers in teacher identity formation, creates partnerships between universities and schools, with learning for all constituents as the focus (Duru, 2006). The PDS program creates an environment by which pre-service teachers explore their own capacity, as both university and school personnel engage candidates in the process of reflection, creation, and identification. In recent years, the use of portfolios and attendant discussion of these, provides universities and schools with information regarding pre-service teachers’ disposition toward the development of their identity as teachers, which differs from traditional teacher preparation
programs. According to Prittard (2003), current practice in teacher preparation programs impedes the development of identity, primarily due to pressure from the system that teachers pre-service teachers to comply, rather than explore their identity.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of teacher identity formation among ten PDS candidates in their last year of university study and first year as teachers. A research question guided the study: How did the PDS experience influence identity formation? What were the hierarchical needs of PDS candidates as compared to their needs as first year teachers? Hypothetically, it was assumed that the PDS experience would foster identity formation and result in higher levels of need, in the categories of self-actualization and transcendence.

**Theoretical framework – related literature**

Abraham Maslow developed a humanist approach to management, known commonly as the Hierarchy of Need. The original hierarchy consisted of five levels: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (1966). In later years, Maslow added three addition levels, two between esteem and self-actualization; need to know and need for aesthetics. The third addition followed self-actualization in the form of transcendence. The assumption upon which Maslow built the hierarchy suggests that individuals move upward through the hierarchy of needs satisfying hunger and shelter prior to seeking the esteem of others. Likewise, until an individual receives some notice or inclusion by others, and fosters a need to know and know aesthetics, Maslow suggests that to reach a state of self-actualization remains challenging. Finally, Maslow would suggest that a self-actualized person, although in a continuous state of development, has the potential to reach beyond themselves to others who need them, transcending beyond self (Maslow, 1967; 1987).
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The introduction of the hierarchy prompted application in education, particularly teacher preparation. Aspy (1969) introduced the notion of including Maslow’s hierarchy to explain the discomfort student teachers feel as they enter the field. The safety of the university left behind, places the candidate in the position of seeking safety in the new environment. Garland and Foster (1972) applied Aspy’s recommendations for including Maslow’s hierarchy in teacher preparation programs for elementary teachers and found success among their students as they worked toward certification.

Pre-service and first year teachers, as they form their identity, undergo a transformation from student to teacher of record. In this process, pre-service teachers seek safety in the courses they take and placements they experience. In PDS programs that foster cadre/cohort approaches to course instruction and field placement, candidates seek belonging among peers and mentor teachers in the field. Likewise, they seek approval from peers, university instructors, mentor teachers, and principals. Because candidates see themselves as ending a program, rather than starting a life as a teacher, self-actualization as a teacher remains challenging, until the pre-service teacher plans for, manages, and instructs the students with some level of success. The ability to transcend and focus completely on the students remains elusive, due to the pressures of graduation, certification testing, and course completion (Walling & Lewis, 2000; Duru, 2006).

Similarly, first year teachers’ experiences relate directly to Maslow’s Hierarchy. First year teachers, seek the safety offered by the district personnel office, school administrators, and team members in the grade level or content area. Safety can come in the form of available materials, space, and positioning on the team. This leads to the first year teachers’ need to belong to the culture of the school, the team to which they are assigned, and the culture of parents whose children they teach. Once they belong, through whatever mechanism, first year teachers have a desire for acceptance of their work by their team,
administrators, students, and parents. They need to know that what they are planning and delivering is on target and that there is an aesthetic value to what they do. When these needs are met, the first year teacher self-actualizes and makes decisions based on what they know is right, and for the right reasons. When they achieve this, they can focus on the needs of the children, rather than the needs of others or their personal needs. The development of personal identity leads to the highest level of the hierarchy (Burn, 2007; Smith, 2007; Findlay, 2006). In contrast, Dymoke and Harrison (2006) note that first year teachers, stymied by a system that thwarts their identity formation, impedes their progress toward higher levels of management, toward self-actualization.

Method

Setting

The PDS program in which this study is set, maintains a partnership between a university in North Texas and the local school district. The partnership consists of a collection of teams, including: principals, teachers, candidates, supervisors, instructors, and district personnel. Each team accepts responsibility for specific aspects of the operations and management of the PDS. Principal team members manage the logistics of the program, recommending. The teacher leadership team, led by one teacher representative from each school participating, ranging from 6-13 members, depending on the number of candidates placed in the program by the field experience office. This team develops and delivers staff development to mentor teachers twice annually, develops candidate orientation to schools, and conducts action research with candidates. Candidate team members include all enrolled students and are responsible for designing, engaging school and community personnel, and each other, in weekly seminars during the last semester of student teaching. More recently, the candidates accepted responsibility for organizing a social action project of math nights in schools. Teams of supervisors discuss and implement plans for observing and guiding
candidates. Instructors from the university meet to develop aligned curriculum across methods courses, offered in the first of two PDS semesters. District teams develop agreements of operation, as well as larger district events, such as staff development for candidates, mentor teachers, as well as gala events that recognize the work of mentor teachers and candidates.

The one-year program engages candidates in two phases of professional preparation. In the first semester candidates attend four methods classes: mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts, across two six-hour consecutive days of instruction. On two other consecutive days, candidates observe in schools, relating instruction in the university class to the field. In addition, the candidates conduct tutoring projects, tying theory to practice. In addition, trained as substitute teachers, the candidates substitute for teachers who attend PDS training. Throughout this first semester, all candidates experience both title I schools and non-title I schools. At both schools, mentor teachers, as teams of 8-10 teachers, engage candidates in the understanding of schooling from an adult perspective. In the final semester, candidates teach daily in the student teaching phase of the program. During this time, each candidate works with two mentor teachers, in two seven-week placements.

Professional supervisors work with candidates and mentor teachers to develop the candidates’ potential. Mentor teachers and candidates conduct action research projects during each seven-week rotation. In addition, each week, candidates assigned to a school, sponsor a seminar on a topic derived by the candidates at the beginning of the semester.

During both semesters, candidates, with the assistance of instructors, mentor teachers, and supervisors, develop professional portfolios. The portfolios employ the INTASC standards as an organizational structure. During the observation semester, artifacts include: projects from courses and experiences in the field. During the student teaching semester, artifacts represent the candidates’ ability to synthesize and evaluate their planning and
implementation of plans as noted in student work. The portfolios, judged by university instructors and supervisors, serve as a means of determining the level of readiness for professional life as a teacher. Exit interviews at the end of student teaching provide additional information regarding teacher identity formation and levels of personal management and needs.

Subjects

The subjects for the study were ten first year teachers who had been candidates in the PDS during the first year of the study, and were now employed in the district where they completed their PDS program. All teachers were females. Nine of the ten were Caucasian and one African American. The ages of the subjects ranged from 23-26. All subjects graduated from the program with a 3.3 or better GPA. All subjects were employed in the elementary schools in the district.

Procedure

The study spanned two school years, 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. During the first year, twenty candidates agreed to participate in the study, which entailed a series of interviews and review of the professional portfolio. During individual, audiotaped interviews candidates were asked to discuss several topics related to themselves as future teachers. Candidates were asked to discuss their job situation and the effect of the portfolio on preparing for interviews and the use of the portfolios during the interview process. In addition, candidates were asked to discuss the development of another version of the portfolio and the benefits they received from the newer version that required synthesis and evaluation. Finally, the candidates were asked to reflect on themselves as teachers and what influenced their understandign of themselves in that
role. Candidates were free to openly express themselves during the thirty minute exit interview.

The e-portfolio served as additional information regarding the candidates' perception of their identity formation and hierarchy of needs as a teacher. During the first semester of the PDS, portfolios were presented in small groups, then submitted electronically in Livetext®. In the second semester the portfolio was presented formally as a professional portfolio and delivered individually. During the interview, the candidate presented two INTASC standards and the attendant artifacts, describing how the reflective writing in relationship to the standard showed their development as a teacher forming her identity. Following the interview and display of the portfolio, the instructor and supervisor read through the entire portfolio and judged the level of reflection against a rubric that measured for language that indicated a use of synthesis and evaluation to describe the relationship of the artifacts to the standards. The portfolios were reviewed a second time for evidence of identity formation and hierarchy of needs.

During the second year, 2006-2007, ten of the original twenty candidates accepted jobs in the partnership district. During their first year of teaching, the teachers were observed during the first year teacher academy, a required staff development for all first year teachers. The first year teacher academy spanned four sessions across a six month period and covered the topics of lesson planning, classroom management, personal learning styles, organization, and mentorship. Each first year teacher was assigned a mentor contact person from the district, who met with them at the beginning of the school year. In addition, each teacher was observed teacher on one occasion for 45 minutes,
followed by a thirty minute interview. The observations were recorded in field notes and interviews tape recorded.

Data analysis

Data analyzed included: PDS I portfolio, PDS II portfolio, transcribed interview data from PDS II portfolio interviews, observation notes of classroom observations, and transcribed interviews with each of the ten teachers. The data were entered into NVIVO® N6 program. The data were analyzed using a comparison method, whereby each teacher’s data were analyzed through the hierarchy of need levels, across the two years of data. The findings for each teacher were then compared using a constant comparative method of analysis to determine developmental trends across all ten teachers. The trends were then analyzed for upward, flat, or downward movement across the hierarchy. Finally, the data were analyzed employing an emergent approach which revealed the influential components of the PDS program on teacher identity formation.

Findings

Hierarchy of needs

The results of the study confirmed the hypothesized assumption that pre-service teachers undergo a developmental process as they form their identity as teachers, which clearly aligns with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need. A document analysis of the first portfolio revealed a group of candidates deeply concerned about the safety of “doing the right thing”, and the esteem of the professor’s recognition of their work. The artifacts and justifications indicate a need for recognition, rather than a focus on their own self-actualization. In contrast, a document analysis of the second portfolio, and subsequent independent discussion of the student teaching experience demonstrated a significant transformation from candidates in need of recognition, to candidates poised to move forward with their desire to form
themselves into first year teachers. Throughout the portfolio conferences, the candidates continually referred to how “when they get a job”, they would be ready to make a difference in the lives of children. These latter discussions indicated a transformation from candidates whose needs focused on belonging, esteem, and knowledge issues, to the first step into self-actualization.

The most striking result of the study came from the independent interviews with each teacher, following the observations. The emic style interviews allowed teachers to openly discuss at will, their lives as first year teachers. The interview transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, allowing emergent categories to develop throughout the analysis. Two main themes emerged: concern about students and teaming. The concern about students focused on the needs of the most needy. Each teacher, with the exception of one, whose employment focused on remediation, rather than whole class instruction, openly discussed their need to find a way to reach the most needy in the class and the things they went through to achieve this end. They discussed how each child’s learning superceded test score acquisition, and how their job was not done until all children succeeded on some level. This alone indicates a group that has transcended beyond themselves to the children they teach.

In discussions regarding teaming, the discussion fell into two categories: teams that support and teams that don’t. In the former, first year teachers reported that their teams welcomed them, accepted their ideas, and provided materials and insights. In the latter, teachers reported that their teams acted in a completely opposite manner, withholding materials, not sharing ideas, and rejecting their contributions. A single category emerged from the discussion of team; confidence. Both groups, although experiencing different team circumstances, exuded confidence in their ability to teach, in spite of the situation. In the end, both groups discussed the importance of the team, but reconciled that they had a
personal journey to follow, that led to the children’s success. These findings suggest a very strong sense of self-actualization and transcendence.

Developmental trends

The results of the study confirmed the hypothesized assumption that pre-service teachers undergo a developmental process as they form their identity as teachers, which clearly aligns with Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Need*. A document analysis of the first portfolio revealed a group of candidates deeply concerned about the safety of “doing the right thing”, and the esteem of the professor’s recognition of their work. The artifacts and justifications indicate a need for recognition, rather than a focus on their own self-actualization. In contrast, a document analysis of the second portfolio, and subsequent independent discussion of the student teaching experience demonstrated a significant transformation from candidates in need of recognition, to candidates poised to move forward with their desire to form themselves into first year teachers. Throughout the portfolio conferences, the candidates continually referred to how “when they get a job”, they would be ready to make a difference in the lives of children. These latter discussions indicated a transformation from candidates whose needs focused on belonging, esteem, and knowledge issues, to the first step into self-actualization.

Movement across trends

Movement across the trends indicates a group that showed an upward trajectory. In the early stages, the first semester of PDS, teachers overwhelmingly needed assurances in the form of grades and assurances. However, by the second semester of the PDS, the teachers’ needs shifted from esteem toward knowing the right stuff and progressed toward the ethical side of aesthetics, knowing when to do the right thing. They expressed an understanding of school culture and their ability to negotiate the environment, while defining their own identity within the environment of their placement. The first year of teaching, generally
characterized as shaky and unstable, found both in observation and interviews, teachers who were self-actualizing, applying language that indicated that they had transcended, primarily thinking about children and their needs over their own as first year teachers. All ten reported that their district assigned mentor released them from oversight after one session. In addition, all reported a high level of comfort with their identity as teachers. Although several reported that staff and seasoned faculty attempted to acculturate them to the system, all prevailed and maintained their perception of themselves as actualized.

PDS influence on identity

In both the exit interviews from PDS II and in first year teacher interviews, nine out of ten mentioned the influence of PDS on their development toward being self-actualized and having been an influence on their identity as a teacher. They claimed that the PDS experience, particularly since they were empowered with responsibility throughout the program, tested their knowledge and skills as teacher leaders, while under the safety net of PDS. Upon exiting the program, nine out of ten teachers claimed that they felt self-assured and ready to teach immediately following the PDS experience.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of teacher identity formation among ten PDS candidates in their last year of university study and first year as teachers. The first question posed: “How did the PDS experience influence identity formation?” Evidence from the analysis of qualitative data revealed that the PDS had a great influence on identity formation. Several indicators point to this conclusion. Teachers worked successfully with team members, as a contributor in the first year of teaching, taking the lead when necessary. During the PDS experience, candidates work as team members to plan, develop, and deliver seminars each week during PDS II. Candidates referred to the connection between the two. Second, teachers showed a high level of confidence in preparing and
presenting lessons. Teachers referred to the independent tutoring project conducted during PDS as a project that gave them the self-assurance to plan and implement lessons. Third, teachers referred to the portfolio process as a tool that gave them the reflective skills they needed to assess their teaching and student practices. The teachers’ identity of themselves as competent, confident, reflective teachers began in the PDS and continued through their first successful year of teaching.

The second question posed: “What were the hierarchical needs of PDS candidates as compared to their needs as first year teachers?” addressed the progression from needs of esteem and recognition to needs of self-actualization and transcendence. The portfolio in the earlier stages indicated that candidates focused inward toward themselves as needy learners, seeking approval and recognition, common among university students. However, the latter portfolio entries suggest a group that had progressed in a vertically upward movement toward needs to know more and need for aesthetic understanding, primarily in the areas of ethics, what is the right and wrong thing to do in schools and with students. Finally, interviews with teachers suggested that their needs were to continually improve, attend to the needs of their students, and seek additional knowledge and skills. The upward movement suggests that teachers grew across time far beyond the need for survival, generally observed among first year teachers.

Trends in teacher attrition suggest that mentoring and nurturing first year teachers attenuates the loss of teachers. The theory of PDS suggests that mentoring and nurturing during the PDS program, produces teachers capable of overcoming the trials and tribulations of first-year teaching, attenuating the loss of teachers. The observations of the first year teachers in the first year teacher academy showed teachers who took initiative, encouraged others, and led group activities. Observations of the ten teachers in the field revealed a confident, controlled, calm group, unlike the stereotypic first year teacher, generally
characterized as scattered and in need of continuous support. Each teacher observed, across grade levels K-5, showed poise in managing, communicating, and guiding students to learning, in engaging, and interesting ways. These observed behaviors indicated a group that had reached a level of self-actualization as teachers, in addition to the final level of transcendence.

This isolated case study of one PDS, ten of its graduates as employees in the same district, and their hierarchical development from safety to self-actualization and beyond, provides a model for studying PDS and other teacher preparation settings. Although these findings provide no generalizability beyond the context of the setting, the notion of tracking PDS candidates through first year teaching supports the study of retention, and whether a hierarchy of need proves feasible as a tool to more deeply understand the process teachers undergo as they form their identity. The study lends to further research on how PDS programs can foster teacher identity formation through the hierarchical development of personal management from physiological, through safety, belonging, esteem, need to know, and eventually to self-actualization and transcendence into the lives of children. Although many pre-service teachers enter the field because of their love of children, the many challenges of first year teaching can distract them from their purported purpose. The study of the PDS’s role in teacher identity formation informs the profession and supports the need for excellence in teaching through hierarchical development.
Bibliography


