Are We Effective in the Delivery of Professional Development?

*We teacher educators perform one of the most important tasks for future generations of this country: the preparation of their teachers. Yet many experts within and outside of education question our ability to perform this task (Goodlad, 1990). They say we can’t answer questions like: What vision of teaching guides our efforts to prepare teachers?*

-Colten and Sparks-Langer, 1993

When I first entered the Master’s program in the area of early childhood special education, I never imagined that my professional training and experiences would lead me to where I am today. I thought my career goals and dreams lied within my future work with young children; never had it crossed my mind to work within a higher education settings. Along the way, however, I discovered my interests and strengths came through as I worked more with adults to support their ability to effort with young children. While I suspect others have come into the field of higher education in much in the same way, I continue to reflect if my future as an instructor in a higher education setting will provide an outlet for me to accomplish my professional goals and achieve a desired impact on the field.

*Quality Professional Development and Higher Education*

The past year as an instructor has proven to be challenging and present me with questions I have not been able to answer; questions that have left me wondering about my role and where future lies within the field. Last year when I was looking into systems change models, I kept coming across statements highlighting the fact that teachers entering schools were not leaving their preservice training programs prepared to face the challenges within the classroom (e.g. Guskey, 1999). The more I read on the topic the more I discovered the negative view towards the professional development offered in
higher education settings. I thought the message portraying a lack of quality was being exaggerated, until I started working with first year teachers. Not only were they unable to meet the challenges they faced in the classroom, but they were unable to implement basic strategies and supports that are foundational pieces within every special education program. Whether these teachers were unable to retain the information covered in their program, carry through what they had learned, or did not understand a purpose for the applications of the strategies, their training program at some level had failed to prepare them.

I do hold the belief that the responsibility of learning is shared between the student and the instructor, but what do we do if we have students not holding up their end of the partnership and yet meeting the expectations of our courses and programs? Is the expectations developed a problem or our evaluation process? How do we ensure that the competences we expect students to achieve in our courses are retained when they leave our programs? While school districts are required to have in place mentoring programs to support first year teachers, we know the reality of these programs and the lack of support, time or value held by many administrators in mentoring teachers. What is our role then after students have left our programs to ensure that we are training teachers that can meet the demands and responsibilities of their future careers?

*Dilemma of Quality*

As I considered the impact of higher education as whole, my concerns and questions turns to understanding how my teaching is impacting my students and the future children and families they will work with. For example, last week my class continued to look at IEP development. During our final conversations, I had a student
comment to me that she really valued the considerations that were presented in class, recognized the benefit of what we were discussing, but the fact was, she was unable to carry through much of what was discussed since her district already had a defined process from which she could not deviate. After thinking more about what she said, I thought about what type of impact I was making with my students, were they really benefiting from their training program, and if our program is really making a difference. I decided there were two elements I need to understand further, my vision for teaching and how to evaluate the quality of my instruction.

Vision for Teaching

While a priority in my teaching is focused on the skills and knowledge that I want my students to have related to supporting young children and families, I also want them to achieve skills that will better them as professionals to carry through the quality we want to see in the field. I need to have a better idea of the bigger picture of what I want my students to know and able to do when they leave. My teaching vision entails the following components

- I want my students to be leaders in the field and to understand how they can impact the future of children and families by always striving and guiding others toward the potential quality that every program can meet
- I want them to leave with strong problem solving and critical thinking skills to recognize their current knowledge and ability, how to apply what they know, and understand what they need to do support family and children effectively
I want to foster in them the continued need to keep learning and never be satisfied with what is currently happening, that there is always room for improvement and change.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of My Teaching

Achieving my vision for teaching and enhancing the quality of the professional development I offer to future students is also dependent on developing my understanding of the effectiveness of my teaching. As I started putting together my final reflection, I thought what I needed to focus on was the student and course evaluations procedures I have in place. As I reviewed the strategies and considerations presented by Angelo and Cross (1993) and Davis (1993) on evaluation, I did not find what I was looking to understand. The strategies discuss would not yield the information I need to consider the level of quality within my teaching for the simple fact that what I was looking for was a list of quality professional development standards in higher education settings. What I found through further review is a lack of a agreed upon or established set of standards for professional development in higher educations settings in which to evaluate my instruction.

Instructors in higher education vary in the strategies and teaching styles they utilize in their courses. How do we know from one instructor to another how effectively they are supporting their students? What criteria or guidelines would we use to evaluate their techniques? What are the standards for professional development that we need to consider? In 2001, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) established standards for professional development in schools. While these standards are based on what is known to be effective practices within the area of professional development, the
guidelines established are not representative of the professional development offered in higher education settings. Professional development takes many forms and can have different intended purposes and outcomes (Garmston, 2005). The type of professional development offered in a school setting from a higher education setting has similar purposes, but the process and organization of the training is very different. As a result, the standards developed by NSDC do not outline quality considerations for high education settings. I feel there is a large gap in my understanding of what it takes to develop a professional development structure that will support the needs of my students. Until I have a clear understanding of what quality professional development entails, I don’t see how I can understand my level of effectiveness or how I can support a desired vision for my students while they are in my course and as they move into the field.

References


