

“Life Giving Experience” and Learning Transfer for Educators in Under Resourced Roman Catholic Schools

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Abstract

This research explored the nature of learning transfer for alumni of the Teacher Formation program (TF), generating findings of significance for adult learning.

Keywords: Learning transfer, teacher professional development, spirituality

Historically, Learning transfer has been of particular interest to areas such as workforce development, human resource development, and adult education. Learning transfer as a scholarly discipline has significant empirical findings in the above areas. Understanding the impact of learning transfer on teachers has been a very recent addition to the field. The role of learning transfer in the development of perseverant and successful teachers within a community is the focus of this research. Benefits for schools and teachers drawn from this research include better understanding of the ways that teachers translate their learning into effective practice in the classroom. These understandings offer significant opportunities to improve overall school outcomes and professional satisfaction for teachers. This study aimed to better understand specific examples of how, if at all, TF alumni teachers transfer their learning from the TF program to their professional and personal lives.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study captures the history of the TF program, learning transfer, and adult learning through the lens of learning transfer.

The Teacher Formation Program

This study’s context is the TF program offered through a mid-sized midwestern private university. The program invites education and religious studies majors to teach in under-resourced Catholic schools while living in a spiritually grounded learning community. The community is made up of other TF participants. The program offers participants the opportunity to earn a Master’s of Education degree at the end of the 2-year experience. The TF program seeks to foster learning communities that nurture Catholic school teachers into a durable career in Catholic schools. TF’s vision is to be a recognized leader in forming life-long Catholic School educators for the midwest.

Learning Transfer

Learning transfer is defined as “the effective and continuing application by learners to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities of knowledge and skills gained in the learning activities” (Broad, 1997, p. 2). Although transferring knowledge to a workplace or a life situation is the ultimate goal of teaching and learning, transferring new knowledge and skills is challenging to achieve because teaching and learning alone are not sufficient to consider professional learning (PL) effective (Foley & Kaiser, 2013;

Grossman & Salas, 2011). Alfred (2001, 2002) emphasized the situated nature of learning. To date, professional learning events are often not adapted to the participants’ needs and rarely take into account the local context and culture (Alfred, 2001; 2002; Brion, 2021a; 2021b; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). According to these authors, adult learning is a process between individuals and within sociocultural contexts. As a result, in order to understand adult learning, one must give attention to the local cultures within which the individuals interact and learn. To foster implementation of learned knowledge and skills, facilitators need to take into consideration learning transfer before, during, and after the course or PL event takes place. In the case of the TF program additional elements of the program such as communal living for two years and a focus on spiritual formation have facilitated and enhanced the transfer of learning.

Although it has been challenging for scholars to measure learning transfer and its impact to date, seminal authors have written extensively about what inhibits the transfer of learning (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013, Hung, 2013, Illeris, 2009). Knowles (1980) stipulated that adults need to understand when, where, and how they will be able to apply the knowledge they learn to their unique situations. Hung (2013) maintained that often the knowledge is not situated enough, and that adults are not able to make connections to their real-life situations.

In addition, research has demonstrated that adults prefer to play an integral role in their own learning in order to transfer the knowledge to their settings post PL (Yelon et al., 2013). Learners also need to receive feedback, and appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their learning (Knowles, 1980, Mezirow, 2000). Hindrances to transfer include not having the opportunities to directly apply the new knowledge. Illeris (2009) proposed that it is important to design learning activities for all types of learning. It is well recognized that some learning takes place best through field activities, while others can be done in a classroom environment, and the TF program provides both field and in class activities, thus offering a rich opportunity to examine transfer. In this paper, the researchers focused on examining the transfer of learning of 10 TF alumni teachers.

Adult Learning

In the realm of Adult learning, transfer training or learning transfer is a well-developed area of study. It is generally agreed that learning within programs such as the TF and other professional development programs are considered adult education. Andragogy tells us that adults learn best when learning experiences emphasize life experiences of the self with the goal of improving social order (Knowles, 1980). We take a sociocultural perspective on adult learning (Vygotsky, 1996, and Bandura, 1977) so that our examination of learning transfer can be situated within the social character of learning and development. Within this sociocultural frame, the importance of the interaction between self and others as a means to learning and development grounds this study and extends beyond simplifications of endogenous and exogenous. Vygotsky (1996) points out that cognitive development emanates from the social interactions of guided learning. The TF, with its heavy reliance on community, mentoring, and social interaction through living together (as illustrated in the findings below) exemplifies this type of learning. Similarly, Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. The interplay between cognition, behavior, and environment helps to explain human behavior through a social learning theory lens where learning becomes a developmental process that is ultimately socio-cultural in nature (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1996). The developmental framework for adult learning offered by Vygotsky

and Bandura provided the foundation for examining learning transfer in the context of teacher professional development in the TF program.

Methodology

Using a qualitative research paradigm and a phenomenological approach, this study sought to examine the perspectives of TF alumni. This methodology has been elaborated in prior publication (Brion, et. al., 2021). What follows is grounded in these earlier findings. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What learning, if any, did TF alumni teachers transfer to their schools after completing the TF program?
2. What supported the transfer of learning?
3. What inhibited the transfer of learning?

The researchers opted for a phenomenological approach because this approach explores cultural and social experiences. Phenomenological work enables researchers to describe the meaning of individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the phenomenon is related to TF alumni's ability to transfer newly acquired knowledge to their workplace and/or life after graduating from the program. Using a phenomenological lens enabled the researchers to describe the participants' perceptions and allowed for the interpretation of the meaning participants attached to those experiences.

The researchers interviewed a total of 10 participants. The semi-structured individual interviews took place in May-June of 2021 and lasted 60-90 minutes each. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data collected allowed the researchers to determine whether the TF participants transferred knowledge from their program to their professional practices and contexts. An IRB for this study was submitted and accepted in October 2020.

The goal of analyzing qualitative data is to make sense of what individuals have said (Merriam, 2009). This is done by consolidating, reducing, and interpreting the interview transcripts. One approach was to follow Maxwell's (2013) guidance in analyzing the qualitative data. Maxwell's four steps included (1) initial steps, (2) categorizing strategies, (3) connecting strategies, and (4) integrating categorizing and connecting data.

The data and our findings were grounded in steps to ensure their trustworthiness. The 10 in depth interviews allowed the researchers to collect rich data. The three researchers met regularly in the data analysis phase to discuss their coding schemes. The collaborative effort by three researchers ensured a greater inter-rater reliability and permitted triangulation of the data and the findings, as well as robust peer analysis thorough member checking.

Findings and Discussion

Our findings included elements of the TF experience that transferred, experiences and qualities of TF that enhanced learning transfer, and experiences and qualities of TF that inhibited learning transfer as well as an understanding of the specific learning within the program.

In spite of the honest sharing of inhibitors to learning transfer, which often revolved around more negative aspects of the TF experience, a guiding thread of our findings was that TF was a life-giving experience for its alumni. More specifically, the things that transferred included key and helpful elements of spiritual life such as prayer and ritual, confidence in having

difficult conversations and resolving conflict, openness to help seeking, and the increased capacity for empathy.

What did they learn?

As opposed to things that helped them learn or kept them from learning, which we turn our attention to next, this category expresses the content of what transferred from the Lalanne experience to their professional and personal lives.

An approach to life

Participants reinforced each others’ perspectives that more than any individual piece of the experience, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The result for many was internalizing an approach to life that emphasized learning from failure, engaging mentors, leading and following well, and maintaining a spiritual connection through community.

Characteristics of a good teacher

Participants were clear that more important than learning particular skills or content as a teacher, becoming a good teacher was more about observing high functioning practicing teachers and finding ways to emulate those specific behaviors.

DEI

Participants reported learning that DEI is not a challenge to be overcome, but an opportunity for increased growth, self-understanding, and relationship building.

Impediments to learning transfer

The inhibitors of learning transfer included negative aspects of communal living such as addressing problems with the physical plant (heating bill, maintenance), balancing life with the newness of teaching as a full-time job, poor leadership at the school, health issues and depression.

Practical matters

As already mentioned, things like problems with housing, bills, maintenance, the everyday experiences that communal living creates were mentioned by participants as factors that kept them from transferring their learning into their later career and personal lives. Additionally, life circumstances such as time management, physical and mental health issues and life transitions were all shared by participants as factors that inhibited learning transfer.

Relationships and community

These living situations were well beyond traditional roommate arrangements. Participants spoke about relationships as both an enhancer and an inhibitor.

Leadership

Participants identified poor leadership practices such as dysfunctional communication styles, authoritarian approaches to management, overreliance on hierarchy and ignoring relationships for the sake of rule or policy as significant challenges to learning transfer.

Mismatch between preparation and reality

Quite simply, when a participant was trained, pre-service, to teach 3rd grade, but found him or herself teaching 8th grade, learning transfer was inhibited.

Enhancers of learning transfer

The enhancers of learning transfer included deep interactions with peers through living in community, spiritual aspects that embellished the community such as communal worship, prayer, and retreats, and frequent access to mentors.

Relationship and community

It was clear from the interviews that the significance of community is relational. These relationships crossed into their professional lives as teachers as well as their personal lives.

Leadership

Participants repeatedly emphasized the pivotal role of leadership. With strong, growth-oriented leadership in the school, participants overwhelmingly had a more positive experience.

DEI

Participants’ opportunities to engage, encounter, and build relationships with people from different locations, from different religious backgrounds, with different priorities in life, with different social, racial and economic backgrounds and contexts, challenged, shaped, and made lasting impressions on all participants.

Reflection, retreats, spiritual growth

For many participants what remained and lingered in their minds as consequential were not methods courses or classroom management tactics, but rather the softer moments of reflection and spiritual encounter, particularly at events such as community-oriented retreats and reflection sessions.

The relationship between theory and practice

Participants valued the opportunity to pursue the academic study of teaching while in the midst of their service as teachers.

Conclusion

This study shed light on the best practices to adopt when nurturing future teachers working in both under-resourced and Catholic schools. This research contributes to both the literature on learning transfer as well as the literature on adult learning. Additionally, by understanding what enhances the transfer of learning among the TF alumni, program leaders will gain a better return on their investment of time and resources in novice teachers. Based on the findings of this study, the researchers will work with colleagues at the TF Program and offer recommendations on how to increase the transfer of learning.

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