Chapter 3

Teaching the Individual: Angelica’s Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, framed as a conversation between a first year teacher and her coach, explores the complexities of preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. The authors describe the multiple knowledge and practice relationships through the eyes and challenges of a first year teaching fellow named Angelica. The important balance of providing teacher candidates with theory, practice, and shared inquiry unfolds as the coach supports Angelica in her desire to understand, reach and teach a puzzling student named Paul. Angelica is able to pull from her resources, her strong foundation of content and pedagogy knowledge, her clinical practice serving the needs of students with special needs, and her comfort with cognitive dissonance. Her conversation integrates theory, clinical fieldwork, and collaborative inquiry to make sense of unique or novel issues that arise in the life of an inclusive classroom.

Instructional Coach: Hi Angelica! I am excited to see your classroom this morning and watch as you launch the first unit of study.

Angelica: I can’t wait for you to meet my third grade kiddos. They are a wonderful group of energetic and curious kids. We have some solid routines in place and I think they are ready for our first big inquiry.

Instructional Coach: What will I see when I walk in at 10:00?

Angelica: Actually when you arrive we will be finishing up our morning meeting and mini-lesson and moving into reading/writing workshop. Here is the lesson plan. Feel free to walk around and talk to students to gauge their understanding of the objective.

Instructional Coach: Is there anything that you would like me to pay close attention to?

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Angelica: Yes, I am glad you asked. Most students are developing independent work habits and need little guidance. Once students transition, I will first be supporting Gloria to get her started and quickly remind Jose and Maria about using their talking-stem-bookmarks. However, it is Paul that has me most concerned. I worry that he is not engaged and that my attempts to help him focus only shuts him down. I could use an objective pair of eyes to help me approach and support Paul more effectively.

Angelica runs off to greet the students as they enter their classroom. She greets each one with a smile and handshake noticing that Paul looks down mumbling his hello.

MEET ANGELICA

This chapter is told through the fresh eyes of Angelica, a first year teaching fellow with the explicit goal to unpack and discover through inquiry, the complexities of learning to teach in an inclusive setting. Angelica teaches third grade in Washington, DC. Together with her coach, Angelica reflects on her practice, her desire to create a safe and trusting environment, her inquiries into best practices, and her next steps to meet the needs of all her students. Teachers, particularly in urban settings, need to have in-depth knowledge, adept skills, and an inquiry stance to make every moment with students a valuable learning experience. They need to help every child placed in their care to succeed with whatever resources are available.

This is not an easy task especially as Angelica is entering the profession at a time when politicized teacher education and evaluation are the public face of school reform. Like many teachers today, novice teachers often feel that they are under a microscope leading to tremendous pressure, isolation and a sense of defeat. Angelica counters this with developing a community of practice and a learner’s stance. She knows that teaching does not come as a pre-packaged commodity in a shiny new box or as a set formula. Inclusive education is a complex convergence of observing, understanding, modeling, guiding and mediating that influences on-the-spot instructional decisions that are part of a teacher’s professional repertoire.

Over a year ago Angelica decided to become a teacher and was accepted into an alternative program called Urban Teachers. This unique program has prepared her to be an inclusive classroom teacher with theoretical learning and clinical practice in both elementary and special education. She finished a rigorous residency year of over 1,500 hours of clinical practice and almost 600 hours of graduate coursework. Her journey began last year when she apprenticed in a veteran teacher’s classroom that served as a lab while she developed her knowledge and practice of teaching. This year she continues with a lighter coursework load, but the huge responsibility of being the teacher of record for twenty-five anxious, disillusioned and historically underserved students. Her graduate coursework, which she attends in evenings after teaching during the day, is designed to deliver theory, clinically based assignments, and models that support the development of an inclusive classroom.

Angelica is supported through her instructors, her cohort and her instructional coach. Her coach will meet with her using both focused and full observation cycles to help her develop into an effective teacher. One tool that guides Angelica’s work with her coach was developed by Urban Teachers and is called The Teacher Practice Rubric. The rubric provides an explicit description of what effective teachers do every day to promote student achievement, as well as the progress they make along the way to get there. The instructional coach and Angelica set clear goals for their work, lay out steps for scaffolding...