Pivoting a PDS program to working with employed interns: a case study in continuing organizational change

Angelo Joseph Letizia
Notre Dame of Maryland University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The methods and procedures in which teachers are trained and supported are rapidly changing. While the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly disrupted education and exacerbated a growing teacher shortage, these problems are not new, they stretch back decades and are the result of underfunding and political machinations among many other factors. This paper is a case study of a small private university and how it transitioned to supporting employed interns and providing on-the-job-training and support for these types of interns in this volatile time for teacher education and preparation.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a case study. The paper chronicles how the initial certification department within a larger school of education was able to transition to meeting the needs of employed interns and supporting them.

Findings – The most important findings for this case study/examination of practice, while not necessarily generalizable, were the creation of a culture, attention to implementation and the fostering of a learning organization.

Originality/value – The teacher shortage forced the university in this paper to change its offerings, assumptions and culture with regard to interns and their needs. While this was unique to one institution, other institutions are most likely in similar situations.

Keywords Organizational change, School culture, Internship

Paper type Case study

The methods and procedures by which teachers are trained are rapidly changing. While the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly disrupted education and exacerbated a growing teacher shortage, these problems are not new. In fact, they stretch back decades (King & Yin, 2022). This paper is a case study of a small private university and how it is transitioning from supporting traditional interns to more nontraditional interns, such as lead teachers and paraprofessionals, during this volatile time. For the purposes of this paper, a traditional intern is an intern who is not an employee of a K-12 school and who only interns at that school. A lead teacher is a teacher who is the teacher of record in the classroom but who is not fully certified and who is working toward certification. Interns who are paraprofessionals are school employees who currently work in a support role at their schools but are transitioning to become a full-time teacher.

The situation

A brief description of the university and academic departments of this case study will be useful for the reader. We are a small, private university with an enrollment of approximately 3000 students located in a mid-sized city in the USA. Our School of Education is divided into three major departments which consist of the initial certification department, the advanced programs department and our doctoral programs. Our professional development schools (PDS) program is governed by the initial certification department, which encompasses all programs dedicated to preservice teachers, from course work to internship. The charge of the initial certification department is to produce and support effective teachers. We generally define effective teachers as those that can work with diverse populations, those who can employ multiple pedagogical strategies appropriately for many different students, those who can act ethically and professionally, those who can utilize technology in a beneficial manner and those who contribute to the wellbeing of their schools.

Our IHE offers a number of different tracks and programs for prospective interns. We offer tracks which result in an undergraduate degree, a master's degree as well as tracks that result in certification only, without a degree. Some of our Master's level tracks are similar to residency programs. Of course, there are many variations of what constitutes a residency program (Pathways Alliance, 2022), but some of the defining features of residency programs include cohorts, intensive course work and a yearlong placement (Pathways Alliance, 2022). In addition, interns in residency programs are not lead teachers (Pathways Alliance, 2022). So, some of our interns do fall into a residency-type model but many do not. In addition, many or our programs could fall under the designation of alternative programs offered by an IHE. These programs establish a path toward certification for students who already hold a bachelor degree (King & Yin, 2022). I want to stress here that we offer a variety of programs and tracks and work to accommodate interns in a variety of situations as well. We also certify in a number of areas and concentrations, some of our largest majors are Special Education and TESOL. All interns complete course work which is designed to prepare them for the internship. Traditional non-employed interns would generally complete their course work first and then begin their internship. (There were also some opportunities for field experiences). This has changed for many interns however. Some interns may start a traditional internship, but then, when they intern at their school, the school may offer them employment. If they accept, this means that they finish their requirements for the internship while being an employee of the school. Other times, teachers or paraprofessionals, who are already employed at a K-12 school, will enroll in our programs. In this case, they are already in the classroom and taking coursework simultaneously. All interns must complete coursework, edTPA (which is a state required performance assessment of all new teachers in Maryland) and an action research project as well as some other smaller requirements such as weekly timesheets.

In years prior, most of our interns were undergraduates who completed their classwork and then enrolled in the internship which was comprised of a 20-week experience spread over two 10-week placements. In each placement, an intern would have a mentor teacher. For the purposes of this paper, these will be referred to as traditional, non-employed interns. The interns were not employed at the school. Of course, we have always had interns who were employed and seeking certification, but generally, the vast majority of our interns were non-employed interns who received training first and they applied for a position after their internship was completed. Now, the reverse is true. In the 2022–2023 academic year, we had 141 interns, of which only 24 were traditional interns. Of the 117 interns that were employed or non-traditional, 92 were already lead teachers and 25 were paraprofessionals. As noted earlier, a lead teacher is a teacher who is the teacher of record in the classroom but who is not fully certified and who is working toward certification. And so, within a short span of time, about three years, our institution had to pivot and recalibrate the entire teacher preparation

program to account for this change. To summarize, the new type of intern we are now largely focused on, what we call employed interns, are generally already employed either as a lead teacher or a paraprofessional. These interns receive some or all of their course work as they teach in their schools. As paid employees of their school districts, these interns must fulfill the obligations of their internship as well as many of the responsibilities of their district simultaneously, which can prove exhausting. While generalizations across our varied programs are difficult, the main difference between our traditional, non-employed interns and our employed interns had to do with the level of support. We had a robust infrastructure of support built, especially in our PDS system (more on this below) which consisted of intern, mentor teacher, liaison and university supervisor. In addition, this network was housed at a PDS school in which we usually had a history with. We just did not have the same level of support for our non-traditional, employed interns, mainly because there were less of them. As a teacher preparation program, we were geared toward traditional internships and now had to rebuild our program to work with a different type of teaching intern with different needs, and this meant creating a culture of support.

This was especially true of our PDS program. Over the last two decades, our PDS program has helped to cultivate partnerships with over a dozen Local Educational Agencies (LEA) in the area. The goal of the PDS program in years past was always to place at least five traditional, non-employed interns in each school. Our PDS program traditionally had no dealings with already employed interns who were seeking certification. Over the last five years or so, as more teachers were hired conditionally (meaning teachers who were teaching and working toward being fully credentialed), this goal became untenable. Instead, while we had roughly the same number of interns a semester, the vast majority of them became nontraditional interns, which also meant that they were outside of our PDS system. In 2022-2023, our PDS system served only 24 interns out of a total of 141. In the fall of 2023 as I write this paper, the numbers of traditional interns continues to decline.

In the 2022-2023 school year, the initial certification department realized that a change needed to happen due to these growing national and local trends. The PDS program is not just about interns, in the widest sense, it is about relationships. These relationships span K-12 and higher education and are critical for interns, faculty, school staff and the community at large. As a department, and specifically at the direction of the department chair, the PDS coordinator, the field placement coordinator and the assistant dean, we realized that PDS needed to be repurposed. We had to redirect and pivot the entire PDS apparatus, at least in part, to serve our nontraditional, employed interns who were usually not a part of PDS. It is also important to reiterate here that there is great variation in the types of nontraditional, employed interns we have, and each type needs various levels of support. Generally, lead teachers have been in the classroom for a number of years. These types of interns usually come from parochial schools. While lead teachers are supplied with a mentor, since they have been teaching a number of years, they usually need less support. In contrast, many paraprofessionals are making the leap to teaching, especially as the teaching shortage intensifies. We as a department have noticed that paraprofessionals generally need much more support and usually work much more closely with their mentor teachers to plan and deliver lesson plans.

Action steps

The 2022-2023 academic school became a turning point for our department with regard to employed mentors and we set out to implement a number of changes to support these types of interns as well as to utilize our PDS to accomplish this task. Organizational changes will usually be less effective if they are not embedded into an organization's culture (Bess & Dee, 2008; Schein & Schein, 2016). Cultural change however is a difficult task (Schein & Schein,

2016). Organizational culture can be defined as assumptions that are taken for granted by organizational members and really the loadstone for organizational behavior (Schein & Schein, 2016). While I do not claim that we became a Learning Organization in a formal sense, some of the tenets of learning organizations were also relevant for us during this transition. Importantly, Argyris (1999, pp. 67–68) notes that

> Organizations do not perform the actions that produce the learning. It is individuals acting as agents of organizations who produce the behavior that leads to learning. Organizations can create conditions that may significantly influence what individuals frame as the problem, design as a solution, and produce as action to solve a problem.

Learning cannot just be the fixing of error, rather, individuals in organizations must learn why the error occurred, individuals must go beyond the problem itself and see its roots and causes (Argyris, 1999). Organizational learning in many ways aligns with the ideas of organizational culture. Individuals carry out the actions but the organization is the context for these actions and the framing and perceiving of actions. With that said, it was important to not just implement shotgun changes, but rather, create a culture of support for employed mentors, their interns, as well as university supervisors and liaisons, and embed organizational learning into this culture so it can grow and continue to adapt. Again, this was the major change for our PDS program, we had to transition it to working with nontraditional, already employed interns as well as their mentors.

We needed to change our assumptions that we had operating by for almost two decades. Those previous assumptions were rooted in the types of interns and what they needed. As such, while we were responding to issues outside of our control (e.g. teacher shortage and the changing nature of interns), we also had to be cognizant of organizational culture. The department chair and assistant dean did not simply order everyone around, rather, the proper soliciting and integration of stakeholder feedback became critical to at least begin establishing cultural change. Top down mandates which are foisted upon organizational members are usually less effective than initiatives which have the input and ownership of team members. In addition, we realized this was an ongoing process. As more people contributed and took ownership, the culture of support, underpinned by continuous improvement and progress, was beginning to form.

As such, it was imperative that we continually solicited the feedback of stakeholders to drive the process. Of course, there are times when executive decisions might need to be made or implemented quickly, but this should be the exception and not the rule. One of our first actions was to commission and in-house study of our major stakeholders and essentially take the pulse of the situation. We set up interviews, focus groups and surveys of current employed interns, mentor teachers, university supervisors as well as the school of education's advisory board. We also had a robust assessment system in place as well and drew on this. While we did not have a large turnout of interns or mentors, we did receive valuable information from other stakeholders, mainly the university supervisors. We were able to integrate many of the supervisor's suggestions, most prominently, we realized that we could adjust the time frames for the submission of assignments for certain interns. This suggestion, at the behest of the supervisors, has alleviated some of the pressure on interns, supervisors and mentors. In a wider sense, while the results of the study were not what we had hoped for, the act of soliciting feedback helped to reinforce a feedback loop, it helped to reinforce the idea that we must listen to stakeholders. So, the head of the initial certification committee and the field placement coordinator listened to the voices on the ground, we listened to the supervisors, mentors, interns and solicited anecdotal feedback as well.

Our first course of action was to strengthen our relationships with the mentors of employed interns. With regard to traditional interns, we always had a much closer relationship with their mentors and we utilized the PDS program to train these mentors. We

realized that while many mentors of employed interns received some type of training from their school systems, we as an IHE needed to augment this training and make it more expansive. We realized that these mentors needed more support, so we began an ad-hoc training program for these mentors in the 2022-2023 and then made this training systematic in the 2023-2024 academic year. PDS liaisons were critical for this action. In our system, PDS liaisons were assigned to a specific school (either an elementary, middle or high school) and worked as the liaison between the IHE and the K-12 school. Liaisons hold meetings with site coordinators at that school (who are school employees) to coordinate PD for interns as well as school-wide PD, train the mentors of traditional interns, recruit mentors as well as other related tasks for the partnership.

Since PDS liaisons did not have many traditional mentors to train, we redirected the PDS liaisons and made them responsible for the training of mentors of employed interns and providing PD to them as appropriate. One major change associated with this was that liaisons were no longer solely training mentors at their schools. Liaisons are still assigned a PDS partner school where they work to deliver PD and undertake research, but liaisons now train mentors outside of their schools as well. We believe that this helps to strengthen relationships and build new ones because now liaisons not only build a relationship with their home schools, but also must cultivate a relationship with 5-7 other schools, albeit in a reduced fashion. As noted earlier, relationships are a key pillar of not only PDS success, but really, in organizational life (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Fullan, 2020). This focus on relationships also ties back into the cultural change. The creation of a new culture of support cannot be done without focusing on relationships. Some of this ground work was already laid with our strong PDS program because PDS is about cultivating strong relationships.

One important tenet of support in this new organizational culture was the creation of a revised handbook for the mentors of employed interns so these mentors could better understand the requirements above and better serve their interns. While we always had some relationship with these mentors, they were small in number and we used more informal methods. Now, we are attempting to make these supports sustainable across programs. These mentors work in the same schools as their interns and are appointed by the school systems, not by us. The handbook was written by the department chair of initial certification programs with input from PDS coordinator, field placement coordinator and assistant dean. The handbook was also presented to the entire initial certification committee for feedback. Finally, the handbook was rolled out in the 2023-2024 academic year.

Another important action step taken to foster this culture was that we began to offer a small stipend to the mentors of employed interns. While the stipend is not much, it is at least a recognition of the work these mentors are doing (many also receive some type of stipend from their school districts). Our goal however was not to burden mentors who are already overworked. Mentors have to sit for a 30-min training with the liaison over zoom, sign off on the intern's timesheets and complete an evaluation of the intern. In reality these mentors are usually conferring daily with their interns, especially the mentors or paraprofessionals who are becoming teachers and helping them construct lesson plans for edTPA. The important point to note here is that the PDS liaison becomes a contact point for these mentors. The mentor can contact the liaison if they have questions or concerns. In a wider sense, the liaison-mentor connection that we established is an important pillar in the new culture of support we are building. I can personally attest, as a liaison, that I have been in contact with many mentors of employed interns.

Creating changes and policies as part of a new culture is one thing, but those implementing them must also be supported (Fowler, 2012). This was critical as these new directives were developed, and ongoing training and support for those that have to implement the new directives is paramount. Specifically, PDS liaisons had to be trained and supported to train new types of mentors and university supervisors had to be given some direction because

while their responsibilities did not drastically change, many of them were working with this new intern population and also had to integrate the mentors in a more meaningful fashion. And of course, as mentioned earlier, we had to develop a new mentor training for the mentors of employed interns. At the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, a training was held for liaisons to better support them in their new role and university supervisors were briefed in their meetings. One half hour training cannot solve all the problems we would face, so we built in time to our PDS meetings to discuss mentor training issues. This time is critical because it is in spaces like these that new seeds of organizational culture take root.

Assessment

How will we know if our changes are working? For one, as noted above, our internship program in general and PDS in particular has always had a robust system of assessment. Numerous surveys are sent out to interns, mentors and supervisors, feedback is analyzed by PDS members as well as those on the initial certification committee (many members overlap on these committees) and changes are made when appropriate and in consultation with administration. So, we will continue to utilize this framework. However, we also plan to assess mentors of employed interns more efficiently with more tailored and relevant surveys.

While we have formal mechanisms of assessment, we also rely on more anecdotal and informal methods as well. Of course, while programmatic changes should not be made solely on anecdotal data, talking to stakeholders informally and just listening to rumblings can be very valuable. We always utilize the various meetings (e.g. initial certification meetings, PDS meetings, university supervisor meetings) to solicit informal feedback and really just ask how people are doing and what struggles they are facing and if they have ideas for improvement. Last year, one of our seasoned supervisors and liaisons shared some training materials that she had been using with mentors of employed interns on her own. Those materials were incorporated into the appendices of the handbook. This was an informal exchange between members (e.g. liaision, initial certification chair) which resulted into a beneficial addition to the handbook and training procedures.

Takeaways

The situation at our university is unique and the insights from this study cannot be translated exactly to another institution. With that said, I do believe that this study can provide some general insights for those who are pursuing institutional change. Perhaps the most important insight of this study revolves around the notion of institutional culture. As noted above, ad-hoc changes will most likely not be effective if they are not supported and contextualized in organizational culture. More than this, these changes should not be the result of executive actions on the part of the administration, but all should have some voice. Leaders can have a vision, but the vision then requires buy-in and ownership of all members (Kouzes & Posner, 2023).

The cultural changes we sought were twofold. For one, we wanted to strengthen the culture of support with regard to our employed interns and their mentors. This meant creating stronger links between mentors and the university, as well as providing more support in the form of training, stipends and handbooks. But culture cannot be sustained by formalized trainings and resources alone, cultural change has to be something believed in and abided by. So, we as an initial certification committee wanted to ensure that we were not perpetuating empty slogans but rather, ideas and notions that members truly believed in and most importantly acted on. This takes repetition and time. The other aspect to our cultural change program was the idea of continuous learning and improvement. The changes implemented were not meant to be the end, but rather, the beginning of an ongoing conversation and process. We want to constantly learn and value this idea above all else.

Another aspect to this constant learning is training for implementors. We learned that telling somebody something once is most likely not going to lead to effective change, rather, people who are going to carry out changes needed to be effectively trained. At this point it is too early to declare victory on this front, rather, we will continue to learn from and listen to our members. We also do not know what new challenges will emerge in the future, as Fullan (2020, p. 62) notes, we live on "the edge of chaos." As such learning will be even more paramount to weather any impending storm.

References

Argyris, C. (1999). *On organizational learning* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Business.

Bess, J., & Dee, J. (2008). *Understanding college and university organization: Theories for effective policy and practice* (*II*). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2021). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (8th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fowler, F. (2012). *Policy studies for educational leaders: An introduction* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Fullan, M. (2020). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

King, J., & Yin, J. (2022). *The alternative teacher certification sector outside higher education*. The Center for American Progress. Available from: https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-alternative-teacher-certification-sector-outside-higher-education/

Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2023). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (7th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pathways Alliance (2022). Prepared to teach, & national center for teacher residencies. *Towards a National Definition of Teacher Residencies*. Available from: https://educate.bankstreet.edu/pt/38

Schein, E., & Schein, P. (2016). *Organizational culture and leadership* (5th ed). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Corresponding author
Angelo Joseph Letizia can be contacted at: aletizia@ndm.edu