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ABSTRACT

The use of collaborative case studies is an important tool for promoting teacher development, providing preservice teachers with opportunities to apply what they have learned in a real life context. This paper describes the design and evolution of a unique application of case study methodology by two early childhood/elementary education professors at two institutions with both graduate and undergraduate preservice teachers. Their overall goal was to guide preservice teachers in becoming active learners and responsive problem solvers, integrating theory into actual practice through collaborative inquiry. The components of the collaborative case study cycle are identifying a child, gathering information, planning and implementing strategies, observing and reflecting on the observations, and continuing or revising the strategies. In this model, multiple sources of information about individual children are gathered through demographics, daily observation, and reflections by the preservice teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor. Using the information collected, the preservice teacher is responsible for designing and implementing appropriate strategies for working with the child. The major source of research data is the individual case studies that the preservice teachers write as a culminating activity in their courses, as well as journal entries and class discussions. Findings discussed include: mentor strategies developed during the study; student analysis leading to new teaching strategies; building a repertoire of strategies as preservice teachers applied their learning to their own situations; and reflections in practice by the researchers in order to improve their own teaching and learning. (Contains 11 references.) (ND)

Engaging Preservice Teachers in Collaborative Inquiry through the Development of Individual Case Studies

Research Report

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Engaging Preservice Teachers in Collaborative Inquiry and the Development of Individual Case Studies

Introduction:

It is well recognized that preservice teachers will face a multitude of situations while working in our diverse society. Successful teaching requires the skills to separate pertinent facts from less significant and insignificant ones and to identify a variety of acceptable decisions (Weaver, Kowalski, & Hensen, 1989). Therefore, it is essential that teacher education programs provide opportunities for developing multiple strategies for problem solving.

The use of collaborative case studies is an important tool for promoting teacher development. This paper describes the design and evolution of an unique application of case study methodology by two early childhood professors over the past eight years. The changes and modifications made by the teacher educators as they worked with different groups of preservice teachers is reported. Their overall goal was to guide preservice teachers in becoming active learners and responsive problem solvers, integrating theory into actual practice through collaborative inquiry.

Theoretical Framework:

The ability of preservice teachers to be good observers, to see and reflect on what is happening, can make a critical difference in what they do. In turn, their choice of actions can make a critical difference in the lives of children (Irwin & Bushnell, 1980; Cohen & Stern, 1983). The use of case studies provides preservice teachers with opportunities to develop event structured knowledge that integrates the disparate elements of teaching and learning and challenges them to investigate a process as it occurs in a real life context (Harrington, 1991).

Case method teaching requires the learners to apply what they know to new situations, expressing their own ideas, and listening to the ideas of others (Wasserman, 1993). Teachers' knowledge is grounded in their personal understandings and beliefs (Carter, 1992). Driscoll (1995) contends that discussion of cases provides opportunities for reflecting on the action of others through the personal lenses of one's values and philosophy.

Working on collaborative case studies provides opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching strategies. The action research involved in developing the case studies strengthens the view that research not only offers guidelines for teaching, but can also be used by each member involved with the case in answering their own questions about teaching (Ross, 1987). Real world teaching requires problem analysis and decision making on a daily basis (Silverman, Welty, and Lyon, 1992). Case method prepares teacher education students for the real world.

Building on Wassermann's (1994) observation that the more knowledgeable the teacher is about the facts in the case, the more he/she is able to raise questions for student analysis, the current project focused on the preservice teachers becoming the expert authors of individual case studies. In lieu of being provided professional case studies, the teacher educators engaged the preservice teachers in designing original case studies. Thus the problems presented in these case studies were authentic to the preservice teachers, built upon their own experiences or those of their peers. These case studies served as real world environments for the translation of theory to classroom practice.

Method:

Subjects. The two early childhood/elementary education professors who engaged in this action research project represented a state university located in a small urban community in the Northeast and a private college located in a major urban community in the mid-Atlantic region. The preservice teachers were both undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in teacher preparation programs. The preservice teachers developed individual case studies as part of their professional course work.

Design. The collaborative case study cycle is a specific strategy that allows preservice teachers the opportunity to construct knowledge built on prior understanding and integrated with new experiences. The components of the collaborative case study cycle include: (a) identifying a child; (b) gathering information; (c) planning strategies; (d) implementing strategies; (e) observing; (f) reflecting on the observations; and (g) continuing or revising the strategies.

In this model, multiple sources of information about individual children are gathered including demographics, daily observations, and reflections by the preservice teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor. Based on the analysis of the information collected, the preservice teacher is responsible for designing and implementing appropriate strategies for working with the child. The collaborative case study process is fluid, allowing for modifications based on ongoing observations and data analysis by the preservice teacher.

Data Sources. The major source of the data is the individual case studies that the preservice teachers write as a culminating activity in their courses. These individual case studies include the different stages in the case study cycle and documentation of the assessment of the strategies implemented.

Each researcher keeps a log of the variations of the preservice teachers' responses to the model. Data on the growth and development of the preservice teachers is collected from the weekly comments the students write in journals throughout the course.

Data Analysis. The teacher educators engage in shared reflections about the progress they saw in the preservice teachers' professional development. Comparisons are made between initial comments made by the preservice teachers at the beginning of the case study cycle and the concluding comments in their final case study reports. Additional insights are gained from journal entries and class discussions. The teacher educators examine the changes in the type of questions the preservice teachers asked of their peers as they worked collaboratively to clarify issues and develop appropriate strategies.

Findings:

Mentor Strategies. Initially the researchers modeled asking questions that fostered examination of critical issues. For example, a preservice teacher and her teaching team called upon one of the professors to assist in problem solving a "frustrating situation". The professor suggested that the classroom be videotaped so that the teaching team could reflect together on the strategies designed to involve the case study child. As the team reflected on the videotaped events, the professor offered several identifications of positive involvement and leadership on the part of the child with exceptionalities. This level of scaffolding was all that was necessary to jump start the teaching team into extensive recognition of the changes that were taking place within their classroom.

A major goal of the researchers was to create an environment in which the preservice teachers recognized and valued themselves as professionals. As the preservice teachers began asking questions of each other, clarifying issues and developing possible hypotheses the researchers took a much more passive role.

Creating strategies to help students is a challenging task that I do not wish to do alone. Brainstorming and discussing problems with other interns was a tremendous help in generating ideas.

Student Analysis. As collection and analysis of data continues, an important component of the case study cycle is the development of new strategies.

I realized my early conclusions were incorrect...I began to realize this child enjoys playing by himself...I changed my strategies to helping him be able to focus on an activity for a longer period of time...My first conclusions were wrong and were based on not having enough information.

As she completed her case study another preservice teacher realized that her initial perception about a child's self esteem was wrong.

I thought she needed her time to shine and come out of

her shell. In getting to know her I came to realize that is not a problem for her...She's just different from her older sister and that's okay for her. She's not shy or unsure of herself. I realize that it is my job as the teacher to get to know each of the children as individuals.

At the completion of the case study students would often include reflective entries about what they had learned:

I learned that teaching entails much more than creating stimulating lesson plans, and imparting knowledge to students. The system for getting help to those children that need it is extremely difficult and seems to work against the individual. Sometimes teaching is a struggle between "the system" and getting what is best for those students who need assistance.

Another preservice teacher wrote:

...I know I will need to develop and implement effective behavior management from the first day of school. Behavior management is more time consuming and necessary than I'd ever imagined and can lead a student to academic success.

Repertoire Building. By engaging in collaborative inquiry, the preservice teachers built their repertoire of strategies as they applied their new learning to their own situations. The class discussions and written comments gave evidence of their growth as they moved beyond their individual experiences. The written case studies demonstrated not only their integration of theory and practice but also their thirst for further inquiry.

Wasserman (1994) cautioned that a single case is not able to deal with all the topics to be covered in any given course. When the preservice teachers collaborated in creating original cases, they found themselves engaged in dialogue about issues directly related to the experiences they encountered daily, not topics outlined in a course syllabus. These discussions fostered further clarification and understanding about their personal beliefs on teaching and learning.

Reflections on Practice. The researchers engaged in collaborative self study with the goal of improving their own teaching and learning. They were at the same university during the initial stages of the project where they co-facilitated the seminar which paralleled the final semester of student teaching for a group of early childhood preservice teachers. Following the seminar sessions they engaged in shared reflections. After both researcher had transferred to different locations they chose to continue to discuss and reflect on how they were implementing the collaborative case study model with their students. The relationship that had

been established at the beginning of the project provided a risk free environment to share not only their new ideas, but also analyze problems.

The evolution of this project can be described in four phases. In the initial phases of the project, the development of a case study was one of four major assignments related to the student teaching seminar. During phase one of the project, each preservice teacher and cooperating teacher dyad was responsible for preparing a case study to present to the seminar. This process led to close collaboration between the cooperating teacher and the preservice teacher. The newly created case study replaced a case study from a resource or text book. Reflecting upon the process, the researchers noted that the ideas incorporated into the case studies were often dominated by the strategies with which the cooperating teachers were most comfortable.

In phase two of the project, the researchers modified the process to allow the preservice teachers to play a much more dominant role in the selection of the target child, initial collection of data, and selection of strategies. Because planning took place in the seminar, preservice teachers relied more on the exchange of ideas with their peers and through these experiences found their individual and collective voices. As the researchers encouraged the preservice teachers to build on their own experiences and risk implementing their theories, the preservice teachers grew in the realization that they were authentic resources to themselves and each other.

Liz and Mike, both dealing with children from volatile home situations and periodic dislocations, exchanged possible solutions to similar problems:

Liz: *my student has many conflicts revolving around her impulsivity, grabbing things from others and difficulty in attending to tasks...*

Mike: *mine has a very quick temper and often alienates herself from peers- she also has inappropriate attention-getting behaviors, such as singing to herself at group time and refusing to make transitions.*

Liz: *Eve demonstrates considerable strength in the area of music and shows increased attention span when I use signed English. Wonder if that kind of communication could help your child?*

Mike: *My coop teacher and I are trying to create a stable classroom environment and give Sharon positive attention. Maybe trying to capitalize on her interest in music as a transition device would be helpful...*

Phase three was the addition of a series of reflective questions to be completed at the close of the case study. These questions were designed to guide the preservice teachers to examine their understanding of children, teaching, learning, and their own roles as teachers. The series of questions was: (a) What have I learned from the child? (b) What have I learned about my role as a future teacher? and (c) What are my beliefs about teaching and learning?

Phase four of the research project involved the application of this collaborative case study design to other areas of the teacher education curriculum at two different teacher education programs. Through an analysis of the specific foci of case studies, the teacher educators realized that important recurrent issues arose including: 1) descriptions of violent behavior on the part of the child and/or within the child's environment; 2) efforts to understand culturally diverse perspectives and goals; 3) concern about the inclusion of children with exceptionalities in the social group, and 4) identification of learning delays in specific content areas. Based upon these observations, the teacher educators have explored application of the case study model to other courses, such as the development of a family case study assignment in a literacy and culture course.

Implications for Teacher Education

Beginning teachers often discover that they are not prepared for the complex world of teaching. They feel they have mastered the core teaching skills, but question their ability to work with at risk students and students from cultures different from their own (Association of Teacher Educators, 1991).

Today teachers must learn how to adapt to change, assuming responsibility for dealing with their problems. They must be able to understand and analyze situations in order to develop and assess action plans (Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, 1992). Successful teaching relies on teachers making intelligent meaning of complex classroom events more than it does on knowing "the answers" (Wasserman, 1993).

It is critical that teacher educators engage preservice teachers in multiple opportunities for reflecting on real situations. Case method pedagogy engages the learner in active thinking, challenging prior beliefs. Having preservice teachers work with individual children encourages them to translate their prior knowledge into the practice of teaching.

There are no guide books that can prepare teachers for every situation. This action research project demonstrates the development and implementation of a new model in two teacher education institutions. The researchers are committed to helping preservice teachers develop strategies and skills for working with the multitude of issues that face the classroom teacher. As they

work with the model they recognize its value in accommodating the variety of developmental levels and understandings of each preservice teacher. By comparing and contrasting the findings new possibilities for incorporating the collaborative case model into other courses are being generated.

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