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ABSTRACT

As part of course requirements, preservice teachers in the reading/language arts early field program at the University of Southern Mississippi write two case narratives per semester about their teaching experiences in an urban elementary school. This paper discusses the benefits of case writing for preservice teachers and explains the specific attributes of a well-written case. The paper also supplies guidelines and describes course activities that help preservice teachers write their own cases. The paper includes preservice teachers' case excerpts. (Author/RS)

Running head: PRESERVICE TEACHERS' CASES

Preservice Teachers' Cases in an Early Field Placement

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Abstract

As part of course requirements, preservice teachers in our reading/language arts early field program write two case narratives per semester about their teaching experiences in an urban elementary school. In this article we discuss the benefits of case writing for preservice teachers and explain the specific attributes of a well-written case. We also supply guidelines and describe course activities that help preservice teachers write their own cases. Preservice teachers' case excerpts are included in the manuscript.

Preservice Teachers' Cases in an Early Field Placement

As part of course requirements, preservice teachers in our reading /language arts early field program write two case narratives per semester about their teaching experiences in an urban elementary school. Developing cases requires our preservice teachers to identify, reflect upon, and, write about worrisome classroom problems or serious concerns that affect their teaching. We have found that focusing on authentic educational dilemmas and pondering possible solutions enhances our preservice teachers' professional growth. Over the course of the semester our preservice teachers become more reflective in their practice and "more analytic about their work" (L. Shulman, 1992, p. 9). Exploring and seeking solutions to teaching concerns help our preservice teachers come to recognize that there is no one right answer in teaching as well. Most importantly, authoring cases helps to define our preservice teachers early on in their professional careers as problem-solvers who are responsible for their own actions (Merseth,1991).

In addition, the preservice teachers' cases provide context-specific information about our particular field program. The cases illuminate our preservice teachers' frustrations and anxieties and pinpoint what they perceive to be confusing, significant, or problematic. Comparing the preservice teachers' first and second cases with respect to topics, reflective qualities, and problem-solving initiatives, also helps to inform us of expansions over the course of the semester in their professional thinking and development (e.g., see Kagan & Tippins, 1991). Further, the cases alert us to situations that require our immediate attention. Categorizing the cases according to themes and patterns also documents dilemmas that are common to the program. An added bonus is that the content of the cases serve as catalysts for our weekly class discussions and thus provide additional opportunities for fostering our preservice teachers' professional attitudes. Sharing cases with one another in a collaborative setting,

asking clarifying questions, and discussing possible solutions to the problems portrayed, further enhances our preservice teachers' learning (Richert, 1992).

Guiding Our Preservice Teachers' Case Writing Efforts

In order to help our preservice teachers become familiar with teaching cases, we introduce the concept early in the semester. During the second week of class we discuss the purposes and benefits of case writing for teachers. We also model the process of identifying and reflecting upon a teaching problem. Additionally, we share several well-constructed teaching cases written by former preservice teacher program participants, making sure to discuss particular attributes embedded in each narrative that constitute a good case.

At the next class meeting our preservice teachers work in small collaborative groups. Their task is to pose questions, discuss uncertainties, and clarify their understandings about teaching cases. We circulate among the groups, offering guidance, if necessary. We also supply them with the following handout to focus their thinking during this session (see Figure 1).

[Place Figure 1 about here]

After completing their collaborative work, the preservice teachers assemble together in a large group.They share their questions and knowledge about case writing and offer their reactions to the case excerpt, "Invented Spelling." If necessary, we ask probing questions in order to provide a thorough exploration of case narratives. Then, we distribute the following guidelines about the preservice teachers' case writing assignments (see Figure 2).

[Place Figure 2 about here]

Our Preservice Teachers' Cases

In most instances our preservice teachers construct well-developed cases that we think are publishable. Just as Richert (1992) noted about novice teachers' case writing abilities in her graduate education class, the majority of our preservice teachers' writing difficulties center around the inclusion of too many details and extraneous information and the exclusion of dialogue. Editing assistance alleviates these writing problems.

Our preservice teachers mainly write about two issues: 1) their concern for individual children's well-being, safety, and learning; and 2) their problems and frustrations with managing individual children or groups of students. This second theme is consistent with research that suggests that preservice teachers are preoccupied with group management considerations (Kagan & Tippins, 1991). Occasionally, the preservice teachers write about problems with classroom teachers and with other preservice teachers. The following case excerpts illustrate these common themes.

Concern for Individual Children

A Secret

In one of my journal entries with James I wrote how I used to sing in music competitions and I told him how nervous those competitions made me. This was his reply: "I get nervous, too -- about a gun, knife, and to die and to get hit by a car or to kill someone. My grand mom and grand dad had a fight and I went over there almost stabbed him in his head but I missed. Just between us please promise me you will keep this between us to."

Well, as you can see, I was quite alarmed when I read this. Hence, the dilemma. What does one do when a child asks you to keep a promise not to say anything to anyone, but you feel it may be something that the classroom teacher may need to know?

A Child's Fears

One of my students loves to draw in his journal, but he does not write. Initially, I thought that if I gave him time, he would eventually write. But, after much reflection on this situation I am now aware that this child is afraid to write because he is afraid to misspell words. In our last session he was very eager to tell me about a go-cart that he wants, but when I asked him to write about it, his enthusiasm quickly diminished. As he started writing in his journal, he began asking me how to spell words just as he has in the past. I think he thinks he'll get in trouble if he misspells a word. I keep telling him to spell words his own way but it isn't working. I have been thinking that I will tell him about my own problems with spelling so that he will know that it's o.k. This is so sad, isn't it?

This Beautiful Child

The first time I saw Brian his face and his clothes were dirty. He kept bouncing around in his chair, turning around and getting up. When I called his name or touched his little arm to get his attention, he would flash me the biggest and sweetest smile. I kept noticing his facial features. His eyes appear really wide set, and his upper lip appears shorter than it should be. His teeth are spread apart and they protrude. My instincts tell me something is just not right with this adorable, beautiful child. He does not speak very much and it is hard to understand him. I even have to ask him to repeat his responses when they are only one word. When I ask him a question, he gives me that sweet, sweet smile and bounces or jiggles around. When we talk about a story, he usually says inappropriate things like, "I can make an 'm'." When I read a book last week, he did ask, "Can I keep it?" I wanted to give it to him so very much. There's something else intriguing. Brian loves to draw. Also, his favorite color is teal. He goes for this color crayon or marker first, every time we do art. Another thing --he loves for me to read and wants me to hurry up and get to the end of a book. He does not tell me to hurry. Instead, he does it with motions -- like trying to

take the book and motioning to me to turn the pages. I am so worried about him. As a preservice teacher, what can I do? I'm crazy about him and I'm so worried.

Problems and Frustrations with Managing Individual Children or Groups of Students

The Boy with Energy to Burn

Sam is in fourth grade. He's a bundle of energy who constantly talks, laughs, jumps, and generally gives me fits. The first day I had Sam in my group he told me that he hated reading, journal writing, and school. He refused to do anything but sulk and complain. He complained that I put Sam on his name tag even though he told me that Sam was his name. He got mad when I called him Samuel. He said my lesson was stupid. He repeatedly made disgusting remarks about the characters in our book. While this was going on, the classroom teacher sat three feet away and did nothing. I guess she was glad to have him off her hands for awhile! Sam"s behavior has gotten somewhat better, but it's still awful. I have decided to have him sit by me during our group times. That way I can easily reach out my hand and pat his shoulder or hand, or give him a look that shows he is going too far. But what else can I do? I'm only with the group such a short time each week.

Constantine

I know that sharing is a learned trait for all of us. But, I do not think that Constantine has learned this particular trait yet. He never wants to share, whether it is crayons, pencils, or even copies of the literature we are reading. He gets very indignant when someone asks to borrow anything that he is using. If someone touches what he has, he snatches it away from them. On the other hand, if he needs to borrow crayons or a pencil, he takes them from another child without asking. He even holds his books close to his face so that the other kids can't see the pictures. I do not want to believe that Constantine is so disruptive that I

cannot have quality time with the other children in my group. I think that he wants attention, but I really am confused about what to do. Should I send him from the group? Should I talk to the classroom teacher? Should I just remind him to share? Have you ever taught a child like this?

Third Grade Boys

My biggest difficulty thus far has been to manage the distractibility and restlessness of the third grade boys in my group. They have difficulty following directions and I have to constantly remind them to stay in their seat. Firm reminders don't work. Really I am quite discouraged and nervous because this has been going on since the first week and I don't know how to handle them. The classroom teacher is no help. Do you have any suggestions at all? They are causing me to dislike them, and sometimes I wish that they would be absent on the days that I teach.

Dilemmas with Classroom Teachers

A Troublesome Classroom Teacher

My case is about Miss Smith in fourth grade. She has been great in helping me get scissors and other materials, but she has started to give me advice that is really bothering me. Monday she told me that everything we are doing with the children is unrealistic. She says she has tried that way of teaching and it doesn't work. Wednesday I brought some coloring sheets for the students to do while their classmates dictated their predictions about story events to me, but you came by and told Miss Smith to tell me not to give the children coloring sheets. So, she proceeded to give me her negative opinions about what we were doing with the children. Also, she said that you should be the one to tell us about the things you like and dislike, not her. I think her attitude is that she is tired of doing your dirty work. She really bothers me and she yells at the kids. I have never heard her give a positive word. When I'm around Miss Smith, I lose my confidence.

She won't even let the kids show any excitement or enthusiasm. I know that I have to stay in this class. Got any clues as to the solution to this problem?

Difficulties with Other Preservice Teachers

What to do with Vivien?

I have an ongoing problem with one of my fellow preservice teachers. Our personalities clash--I am **WILD** and outgoing and she is very quiet. We teach in the same first grade and our groups are located right next to each other. She keeps confronting me and telling me that I am disturbing her group. I admit I talk loud. But, I prepare great lessons with fabulous visuals, and all Vivien does is read boring books to her group. For instance, last week we were on a pirate adventure at sea. We made three-pointed hats out of newspaper and decorated them with glitter and paint. Each student had an eye patch and a gold earring, and they sat in a big pirate ship as they listened to a story about a little boy's adventures at sea. At the end of the story we found a treasure chest full of jewels, coins, and candy. I should have known what was going to happen!! Vivien was gunning for me after class. "I lost control of my group, thanks to you," she said. "Why don't you go teach out in the hall?" Well, I am a good teacher who is always prepared!!! I do not want to teach out in the hall!! Please tell me a solution to this Vivien problem right away.

Discussion

"The instructional use of classroom cases is not new to teacher education" (Kagan, 1993, p. 719), but teacher educators are just beginning to recognize the special benefits of case writing for preservice teachers (e.g., see LaBoskey, 1992). We have found that writing cases helps our preservice teachers explore real educational problems and situations. In the process of attempting to solve these dilemmas, our preservice teachers develop a "perspective that acknowledges that there...[is] no final answer...no ultimate solution [to teaching] (Richert,

1992, p. 192). Moreover, writing cases "promotes a way of thinking about teaching that recognizes teaching as a complex, intellectually engaging process of adaption and decision making in hard to fathom, ambiguous situations" (Hutchings, 1993, pp. 17-18). Most importantly, authoring cases helps to define our preservice teachers early on in their professional careers, as reflective decision-makers and problem-solvers who are responsible for their own actions. Ultimately, case writing fosters a view of teaching as a scholarly and demanding cognitive endeavor.

Authors' Notes: Janet Richards is an associate professor in the Division of Education and Psychology where she supervises a literature-based literacy partnership between USM and an elementary school. Ramona Moore recently completed her doctorate. Joan Gipe is a research professor. Names used in the case excerpts are pseudonyms. The authors wish to thank the following preservice teachers at The University of Southern Mississippi whose case excerpts are presented in the manuscript: Lisa Couey, Cynthia Cox, Leah Dunkin, Marsha Evans, Arneta Fairley, Stacey Goram, Donna Reynolds, and Jessica Taylor. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Janet Richards, 730 East Beach Boulevard, Long Beach, MS, 39560.

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Figure 1: A handout to focus our preservice teachers' thinking about writing case narratives

Writing Case Narratives about Teaching

"There is not yet a consensus among educators as to what [exactly] constitutes a good case" (Merseth, 1991, p. 7). However, scholars do agree that cases employed in teacher education are focused, engaging narratives varying in length from one to 30 pages, that describe "a wide variety of situations, decisions, dilemmas, and difficulties that routinely confront teachers and teacher educators"(Sykes, 1992, p. ix). Usually written in the first person, cases may tell one main story, "but embedded in that story are other problems that can be discussed" (J. Shulman, 1993, p. 2). Like all good stories, cases portray characters that seem real, contain dialogue and rich detail, present a problem or a series of related problems that unfold over time, and are "contextualized in time and place" (L. Shulman, 1992, p. 21).

It is important to note that all stories of teaching are not cases. Besides describing a context-specific incident or a series of incidents, cases exemplify "an instance of a larger class [or category] of knowledge [such as multicultural issues, social promotions, instructional problems, or relational conflicts among preservice teachers and their university supervisors,] and therefore merit more serious consideration than a simple anecdote or vignette" (L. Shulman, 1992, p. 17). For example, consider the following case excerpt written by a former preservice teacher during her first few weeks in this field program. The content of the case documents the preservice teacher's confusions about encouraging first graders to use invented spelling, but the case also illustrates underlying classes or abstract categories of knowledge that are common to many university field-based initiatives (e.g., conflicts between a university supervisor's and a classroom teacher's literacy instructional orientation, and lack of communication).

Invented Spelling

I had been working in my first grade classroom for a few weeks when I began to realize that the classroom teacher's strategies and the strategies that I have been instructed to use were totally opposite. What made it apparent that we had conflicting strategies was when students would write in their journals.

In a typical lesson I write an entry to each of my students and my students respond to the entry. Often, they ask me to spell a word for them, but I always encourage them to spell the word the way they think it is spelled and not to worry about using standard spelling in their journals.

Then one day I began my lesson by passing out the students' journals and walking around to help them respond to my entry. As usual, they asked me how to spell words and I told them to spell words however they thought they were spelled because I could read anything they wrote. The problem began when the students became irritated with my answer. They began to ask the classroom teacher how to spell words, and to my chagrin and frustration, she spelled them for her students. Was she correct or was I correct, Dr. Richards?"

Questions to Help Guide Your Discussions about
The Case Excerpt, "Invented Spelling"

After carefully reading the case excerpt "Invented Spelling," use the following questions to help guide your discussions about the excerpt. When your collaborative work is completed, you will share your reactions to the case with the class. Therefore, you may wish to jot down your thoughts, opinions, and questions.

1) What did you particularly notice about this case excerpt?
2) Do you think that the case excerpt portrays a single problem or multiple problems? Please elaborate.
3) Was this case excerpt interesting for you to read? If so, why?
4) Is the case excerpt written in a formal or an informal style? Give examples of the writing features in the case to support your opinion.
5) How would you rate the quality of writing displayed in the case excerpt? Please explain your rating.
6) What do you think might make this case excerpt better? For example, is there too much or too little information?
7) How would you attempt to solve the problems portrayed in this case excerpt?
8) What do you think are the larger categories of knowledge presented in this case excerpt?

Figure 2: Guidelines for preservice teachers to write their own cases

Guidelines for Writing Your Own Cases

Write in the first person. You may want to use elements from the Find the Features and Connect Them Strategy to help organize your thoughts (i.e., characters, setting, problem(s), and possible solutions) (Richards, Gipe & Necaise, 1994). Identify who you are, the context of the case, and the problem or series of related problems. If appropriate, provide some background information about your student(s), the curriculum, or the classroom teacher. Write as vivid an account as you can and try to include some real-life dialogue. Your case will be more interesting to read if you exclude extraneous details and if you choose a topic about which you feel strongly and passionately. Your case may be as long as you wish. However, please write at least two double-spaced pages.

The initial draft of your first case is due during the sixth week of class. The initial draft of your second case is due during the twelfth week of class. If necessary, we will be pleased to work individually with you to help you edit your cases. Please note that all cases will be shared by the authors during our class discussions unless a particular case contains sensitive or confidential information. Please make an appointment to meet with one of us if you need help, if you have any questions, or if you do not wish your case to be discussed.

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