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ABSTRACT

Several years ago, the faculty at the University of Connecticut's School of Education embarked on an integrated Bachelor's/Master's elementary teacher preparation program. The new program originated in the educational reform literature of the late 1980s. Significant features included a commitment to: a fifth Master's year; a small number of school districts and professional development centers; each student spending at least 1 day per week in a school; each semester including a seminar where students could relate field experiences to college lectures, theory, and reading; students in their Master's year serving in curriculum development support roles within the school districts; and academic preparation that expected all students to meet the requirements of a liberal arts academic major. The program was especially innovative in parting with the three-credit course. For the elementary program, which had been married to 18 credits of elementary methods in traditional three-credit formats, the change set in motion an additional series of changes that continues to this day. The paper describes these changes, particularly as they impact the methods semester (the senior semester preceding student teaching). One of the innovative projects was for preservice teachers to regularly observe a university educator teaching in an elementary school, then critique his work. The preservice teachers found the program valuable because it offered them a deeper understanding of teaching. (SM)

Changing Perspectives and Practices in the Preparation of Elementary School Teachers at the University of Connecticut

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Nine years ago, the faculty at the University of Connecticut's School of Education embarked on an integrated Bachelors/Masters teacher preparation program. The School of Education had prepared teachers for many years in what could be called a "traditional" four-year Bachelors program. The elementary education program, in particular, was long on college education classes, short on liberal arts academic preparation, limited to student teaching and a brief additional stint in a school classroom and largely confined to the suburban and rural setting of school districts surrounding the university. Moreover, the Masters degree program was a compilation of credits, truly a program in name only. While our faculty had "talked the talk" of teacher education reform, we had yet to take the first step to "walk" that talk.

The new program and its features had their origins in the educational reform literature of the late 1980's: the Holmes Group, the Carnegie Report, and John Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal (Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986; Goodlad, 1990, 1994). Significant features included the following:

1. A commitment to a fifth, Masters, year as an integral part of the teacher preparation program, not an "add-on" to the Bachelors degree.
2. A commitment to a small number of school districts, professional development centers, including those in urban and suburban areas.
3. A requirement that each student would spend at least one day per week in a

school in each of his/her six semesters in the program: junior, senior, and Masters year. In the case of the student teaching semester in the spring of the senior year, this field experience would be twelve full weeks.

4. A requirement that each semester would include a seminar during which students were expected to relate "field" experiences to college lectures, theory, and reading.

5. A commitment to school districts that students in their Masters year would serve in curriculum development support roles in schools, assisting teachers and other school personnel with projects proposed by school faculty. In the best of cases, such activity would be expected to contribute to the "reform agenda" of the school.

6. A commitment to academic preparation such that all students would be expected to meet the requirements of a liberal arts academic major.

Along with adopting the features noted above, the new program parted ways with several staples in the traditional teacher preparation menu. Foremost among these staples was the three-credit course. For the elementary education program, which had been married to eighteen credits of elementary methods in traditional three-credit formats, the changes set in motion an additional series of changes that continues to the present semester. This paper will describe these changes, particularly as they impact the so-called "methods semester" in elementary education, the senior semester preceding student teaching.

Beginning nine years ago, the elementary methods semester included seven credits of methods: a state mandated three-credit class in reading; three one-credit classes in math, science, and social studies; and a one-credit "generic" methods class. In addition to a course in the students' academic majors, all students were required to take three one-

credit lecture classes in philosophy, assessment, and exceptionalities. To this was added a clinic seminar during which a student was expected to work a day a week in a school, relating one's methods instruction to observation and practice in the elementary school classroom. The seminar portion of this course was the "glue" for the semester, the place where students were expected to integrate and analyze their college methods learning with their classroom experiences. In the past few years, these seminars have been led by Ph.D. students, each an experienced teacher seeking an advanced degree.

At first, these elementary methods classes were taught as they appeared in the catalogue: separate courses with the seminar providing the only connective tissue. The faculty then began to combine their efforts. Methods faculty worked to coordinate their efforts with the teachers of the classes in philosophy, assessment, and exceptionality to find points where they could reinforce learning across the courses. Thus, students were expected to relate issues in philosophy to curriculum decisions, and modify a methods assignment to take a case of exceptionality into account.

Perhaps the most dramatic change has taken place in the methods classes. After the second year the four one-credit classes began to meet in a four-hour block; soon an integrated methods class emerged where elementary education students explored the integrative potential and limits of math, science, social studies, and, subsequently, language arts. In one case, three methods professors took their fifty students to a local mill site where the class used maps, old pictures, and census documents to "read" the history of the landscape even as science and math instructors were examining the vegetation and geology, and using sampling procedures to add to their understanding of the landscape. A cemetery next to the mill site provided an additional focus for integrating math and social studies concepts as students studied both gravestones and

census records to compute and analyze life expectancy in the last half of the nineteenth century. This integrated methods class culminated with groups of three students preparing age-appropriate integrated units. Thus, over eight years the methods semester evolved from a series of largely unconnected courses to a far better coordinated and integrated experience.

The educational reform literature has made much of the interactive roles of school and university in the preparation of teachers. Recently, this interaction has been touted as a step toward reform on the part of both school and university teacher preparation. John Goodlad (1994) has termed this process "simultaneous renewal." This emphasis has stood in stark contrast to past practices where the interaction tended to be schools responding to university requests and requirements, with little university "giving" in return. Building a collegial relationship dedicated to reform encountered several problems. Arrayed against Goodlad's concept of "simultaneous renewal" was the assumption by each party that renewal was the other party's burden. Even when these natural hesitancies can be overcome, the practicalities of simultaneous renewal can be complex. For example, how does a school improve its reading scores on statewide exams when college and school faculties may have differing views of the need for phonics instruction? The cooperation and collegiality required if "simultaneous" is to have any meaning require time to identify goals and the steps to achieve those goals, and time to identify problems, clear up misunderstandings and maintain an effective working relationship.

The methods course, and the field experience related to it, makes such a relationship even more complex. First, all must recognize that the methods semester represents an opportunity for the college student to gain classroom teaching experience; s/he lacks both

experience and confidence to be an effective part of the renewal process. In addition, the teacher working with that college student may be focusing on the student's management problems, thus reducing the time available to work on the agenda of school reform. When college methods professors set assignments and propose ideas that question some classroom practices, however politely, the collegial relationship between school and university is strained. University methods students arrive in schools armed with an assignment and ideas about how classrooms should run that may not coincide with the teacher and classroom in which they are placed. Students are then in the awkward position of questioning someone, either the quality of the teacher to whom they are assigned, or the relevance of the college methods class. In a few cases, teachers have taken exception to methods assignments that required college students to complete an interview or other activity with one or more students. Also, in a few cases, college students have reported they have observed classroom practices directly contradictory to methods advocated by a college instructor. Thus, collegiality among university and school faculties has remained inconsistent if not elusive.

Over the last few years, as methods classes moved toward an exploration of the potential and limits of content integration, this strain has increased. How then to reduce tension, promote a reflective spirit on the part of school teachers, university faculty and college students alike? How then to produce a more seamless experience between methods classroom and school classroom? How then to make school teachers a more active part of the teacher education process? And, where appropriate, how then to encourage all parties to the teacher education process, including university professors, to remain open to reflection and change?

A dissatisfaction with the interaction noted above combined with his desire to be part of

the school classroom action led Keith J. Suranna, a Ph.D. student to propose a pilot project as one attempt to resolve some of these difficulties. During the Fall of 1998, Keith worked with a group of twelve clinic students assigned to classes within a rural Connecticut K-4 elementary school. The group consisted of eleven females and one male. After brainstorming ideas with the school's principal on implementing a unique approach to serve these clinic students, it was agreed that Keith would serve as "demonstration teacher" for them to observe and evaluate. With the principal's assistance, it was agreed that Keith would teach four lessons within a two-week time frame. Three clinic students at a time would be given guiding questions with which to evaluate and reflect on his teaching practice.

Veenman (1984) notes that continuing high attrition rate among beginning teachers may be related to what he calls "reality shock." Gordon (1991) writes, "The discrepancy between the beginning teacher's vision of teaching and the real world of teaching can cause serious disillusionment" (p. 4). As Keith examined teacher attrition data and reflected on his own training and practice, he resolved to enhance his work with preservice teachers using activities that had the potential to deepen their understanding of teaching and, hence, bolster their readiness.

Initially, Keith proposed that he teach a variety of subjects at a variety of grade-levels. For example, for one group he would teach a writing lesson in a first grade, and for another group he would teach a science lesson in a fourth grade. While supportive, the classroom teachers thought it nonproductive for their students to be presented with "one-shot" lessons in science or math. Thus, Keith, limited to teach all four lessons in language arts, was able to teach these lessons at four different grade levels: first through fourth. This planning process was encouraging in that it required Keith and the teachers

to work together to consider what was best for both school children and university students.

The first lesson Keith taught was a writing lesson in a first grade classroom. The lesson began with his little girl puppet, Liza Lu, reading a Halloween story to the class. The class was then to write a sentence or two about what they would like to receive as a Halloween treat and then draw a picture of themselves in their costume. The second lesson, which introduced the concept of onomatopoeia, was conducted in a fourth grade classroom. After reading a number of poems which consisted of onomatopoeias, Keith then provided four different sounds, ripping a piece of paper, hitting a ruler on a desk, slapping an eraser on the blackboard, and blowing a note on a harmonica. The students were then to interpret each sound as a word and compose an original onomatopoeia poem. Keith's third lesson, taught in a second grade, involved writing and predicting the outcome of a story. He began by reading a story, stopping just before the climax. Each student was then to write down their prediction of how the story would end. Keith's final lesson involved creative writing and the introduction of adjectives in a third grade. Again, he employed Liza Lu in this lesson.

As mentioned above, with each lesson, three UConn clinic students observed and evaluated Keith's practice. In order for them to focus their evaluations, he provided each with a sheet of five guiding questions which reflect standard lesson presentation. The questions were:

1. What did you notice about how Keith initiated lesson?
2. How did Keith engage students during lesson?
3. What did you notice about students on-task behavior during lesson?
4. What did you notice about how Keith closed lesson?

A space was also provided for additional comments. After observing him, each group was given a week or two to confer. They were then expected to present, in seminar, an evaluation of Keith's lesson and teaching methods. Since he video taped all four lessons, each group was given the option of showing the seminar short excerpts to illustrate their points.

Judging from the discussions generated in seminar, as well as reading students' reflections on observing and evaluating Keith, we have concluded that this activity has fulfilled our primary objectives. Although one student was concerned with "criticizing someone who grades me", the clinic students expressed a deeper understanding of teaching and were able to cull nuances, both positive and negative, regarding Keith's practice. As a number of the students pointed out, it was an opportunity to observe an approach to teaching that they otherwise might not have seen, allowing them to compare and contrast Keith's approach with theirs as well as their cooperating teachers'. One student wrote, "Being able to see this lesson gave me a better understanding of the components of a good lesson and to see a style which may differ from the classroom we are currently in." Another student wrote, "With each teacher I observe, I gain greater knowledge on how to manage and instruct a classroom." Therefore, the students were able to begin to integrate what they had been observing into their own work in the classroom.

All the students expressed that they found this a valuable experience and would recommend it be continued in the future. A woman wrote, "This is the only seminar we had where the leader offered to have us observe him. It's a great idea and I think it should be adopted by all the seminars." Most students recognized how Keith initiated the lesson by introducing himself and expressing his expectations of the class. They

expressed the positive ways his work with his puppet, Liza Lu, had on the students' interest and engagement. One student wrote, "Every eye in the classroom was on her!" Furthermore, the students were able to observe Keith implement effective classroom management techniques. A student who observed him teach in the same classroom to which she was assigned wrote, "It was interesting to see another teacher approach and manage the same students differently than my cooperating teacher." Another student expressed his satisfaction with using a management technique with success in his class after he had observed Keith putting it into practice.

Some students observed that Keith emphasized open-ended questions to the children, not wanting to give the "right" answer and encouraging them to think on their own. In the second grade class, the clinic students were able to observe how he quickly altered his plan for having the children predict the outcome of a story. Upon introducing the book, Keith was surprised to hear how much the students loved the book, with some even shouting out the ending. He quickly altered the assignment, asking them to write a completely different ending. This was a "real life" situation in which the clinic students observed a teacher recover from a potentially negative situation.

One encouraging aspect was that the collegial nature of the project encouraged clinic students to offer suggestions. For example, all of them noted that Keith had failed to provide them with copies of a lesson plan. A student wrote, "By providing us with lesson plans, our methods course is connected to the clinic experience." Another student wrote, "We are expected to write up lesson plans until we have been teaching for awhile, so it would be helpful for us to observe a similar kind of presentation from you." Taking note of this suggestion, we will implement it in the future.

During this time, we have discovered additional benefits in this project. The veteran fourth grade teacher, in whose class Keith taught the onomatopoeia poetry lesson, liked the idea so much she informed Keith and her principal that she would be teaching the same lesson in the future. Furthermore, a fourth grade student in this class stopped Keith in the hall and noted that she had begun to challenge her family to write onomatopoeia poems after providing them with a variety of sounds. This project not only served the UConn clinic students, it helped stimulate growth and interest in both a veteran teacher and a fourth grade student. Such examples suggest that continuing this type of project can strengthen the university/school partnership.

Cynics have noted that a college professor's advocacy of, and commitment to, change is dramatically reduced as s/he approaches a mirror! By allowing ourselves, as teacher educators, to be observed and constructively criticized by our students we are, in a sense, "putting our money where our mouths are." Too many classroom teachers continuously express displeasure at how much their professors seem "out of touch" with classroom realities. Though the practice described in this paper is a first step towards strengthening preservice teacher training, we believe the results can open the door to further exploration. Teacher educators must have the courage to demonstrate the theory they are espousing to help foster a richer dialogue and deeper understanding of what it means to teach. As college and school faculties work to implement this project, the all-important university/school partnership, the proving ground for teacher preparation, will be strengthened. In this way, professors and teachers will be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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