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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s there has been an increasing chorus of calls for professors to reimmerse themselves in the rigors and realities of teaching in a K-12 classroom setting. This paper reports on the rewards and risks its two author/educators encountered in their K-12 classroom teaching reimmersions. One author voluntarily initiated a year-long employment exchange with an experienced fifth-grade teacher as a way to get back in touch with classroom teaching after serving for 17 years as a university-level teacher educator. The second author experienced a classroom teaching reimmersion due to his university's Professional Development School (PDS) agreement. The paper summarizes the risks and rewards that result from their K-12 classroom teaching reimmersion experiences. It concludes with a set of three recommendations for professors who are considering or who are being urged to take part in any type of K-12 classroom teaching reimmersion. (Contains 22 references.) (BT)

Professors in K-12 Classrooms: Rewards, Risks, and Recommendations

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The Context of K–12 Classroom Teaching Reimmersion

Since the mid 1980s there has been an increasing chorus of calls for professors to reimmerse themselves in the rigors and realities of teaching in a K-12 classroom setting. These calls have come from critics of colleges of education and attempts to improve the praxis of K-12 classroom teachers and the people who are responsible for their training (Bullough, Hobbs, Kauchak, Crow, & Stokes, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Holms Group 1986; Labaree 1996; Lanier, 1995; Levine & Trachman, 1997). Hearing the call for reform, a number of college of education professors have individually negotiated and reported on their experiences when they returned to teach in a public school (Baumann 1995b; Collins, 1997; Cuban, 1990; Elliott, 1993 Manera & Cropper, 1980; Morris, 1978).

This article reports on the rewards and risks we encountered in our own K-12 classroom teaching reimmersions. The first author voluntarily initiated a yearlong employment exchange with an experienced 5th grade teacher as a way to get back in touch with classroom teaching after serving for 17 years as a university-level teacher educator. The second author experienced a classroom teaching reimmersion due to his university's Professional Development School (PDS) agreement. His experience included teaching field-based social studies methods classes in two schools. To lend credibility to his work, the second author frequently taught demonstration lessons in the schools' classrooms.

This article summarizes the rewards and risks that result from a K–12 classroom teaching reimmersion experience. It concludes with a set of three recommendations for

professors who are considering--or who are being urged to take part in--any type of K–12 classroom teaching reimmersion.

Rewards of Reimmersion

Successfully completing any form of K-12 classroom teaching reimmersion proves that you still have what it takes to teach young people using the content and methods employed by most teachers. Simply knowing that you made it through the experience may be enough to bolster your self-concept and enhance your image as a professor who is proficient in the real world classroom.

Of course, the K-12 teachers you taught with will also admire your efforts. As a result, these practicing professionals may be more receptive to receiving future student teachers and collaborating on writing and research projects. Their approval of your teaching performance may also translate into positive comments in front of other teachers and thus help to elevate the status of the entire teacher preparation program. Some of these teachers may decide that they would like to pursue advanced degrees, and, in a few years, it may be possible that the students you taught in your reimmersion experience will show up in your university's teacher education program. These rewards of reimmersion are substantial since a high value is often placed on positive linkages with the local education community. In the end, a professor's successful completion of a K–12 teaching reimmersion will doubtlessly engender the respect of all members of the education community.

Beyond these important and largely intrinsic rewards, however, lie important resources for improving teacher education. For example, your reimmersion will almost certainly provide a veritable goldmine of anecdotes that may be used to illustrate your

future teacher training instruction. Anecdote-based story telling is a stock and trade of virtually all teacher educators. Stories, however, age in their cultural and technological contexts. The important details that bring anecdotes to life also fade along with our other memories, making them less compelling as the years go by. Thus gaining first-hand, thoroughly modern anecdotes is a significant benefit to any teacher educator who engages in a reimmersion.

It is also entirely possible that your reimmersion experience will provide data for the investigation of questions related to your ongoing research interests (see, for example, Ball & Rundquist, 1993; Hudson-Ross, & McWorter, 1997). Illustrating for students the connection between research and practice is one of the most difficult tasks for all teacher educators. Reducing the schism between theory, research, and practice is one of the most important potential benefits of reimmersion. Indeed, the potential for collaborative research was an often-discussed purpose of the PDS model (Holms Group 1986; Book, 1996). It is clear, however, that substantial difficulties surround the achievement of this outcome (see, for example, Bullough, et. al., 1999; Book, 1996; Higgins & Merickel, 1997).

Risks of Reimmersion

While the rewards of a reimmersion experience are varied and significant, the risks associated with these experiences are also substantial. The risks associated with a K-12 classroom teaching reimmersion fall into three broad categories: (1) instructional failure; (2) loss of involvement in the department/college; and (3) decreased professional productivity. While we focus primarily on the risks associated with any type

of reimmersion, we include comments about unique risks that come from our own very different types of K-12 classroom teaching experiences.

Instructional Failure Perhaps the most threatening risk of reimmersion is the very real prospect of instructional failure during your K-12 classroom teaching experience. Simple instructional failures involve such things as worksheets that are too easy, directions that prove to be inadequate, and homework assignments that are impossibly difficult. At a more threatening level, your teaching performance may be called into question by students' and parents' complaints, low test scores, or classroom accidents and fights. If you have been out of the K–12 classroom for some time, these risks are doubtlessly increased during the period of time it takes you to reactivate your grade-level-specific teaching skills and adjust to the demands of teaching today's students (Ciscell, 1993). If your presence in the K–12 classroom is the result of a PDS collaboration and your methods students observe your instructional failures, the consequences of such failures could be far reaching indeed.

Worse yet, if you have committed to a yearlong teaching reimmersion and you manage to last only weeks or just barely make it through the first grading period, how will you explain this failure to your colleagues, students, and others? If your premature departure is the result of parents' complaints, school administrators' decisions, or some particularly egregious incident, the embarrassment could be difficult to professionally survive. The plans that have been put into place to cover your university responsibilities will have to be abruptly altered. The school system, too, will have to quickly move to find a more competent K–12 classroom teacher for the students you have ignominiously

left behind. Whether true or not, the stories and gossip surrounding such a failure may do you and your teacher education program great potential harm.

Related to the potential of substantial instructional failure is your increased exposure to lawsuits. Today's classroom teachers and public school administrators are keenly aware of this threat and do many things to reduce their exposure. The fact that you are a university professor, instead of inspiring confidence, may increase parents' sensitivity to instructional anomalies or any other departure from their commonplace conceptions of normal school procedures. In fact, we believe that your doctorate and membership in the teacher training profession makes you substantially more suspect of malfeasance than any other teacher. This is so not only because the teacher education profession is widely blamed in the popular press for a variety of K–12 educational fads and failures (Labaree, 1996), but also because your motives for undertaking an active role in a school classroom are, bluntly put, questionable. Parents may develop a number of suspicions ranging from the belief that you are teaching in the K–12 classroom because you couldn't make it in the college classroom, to the unpleasant sensation that their children are being put under a microscope for hidden research purposes.

Loss of College Contact The second area of risk related to a K-12 teaching reimmersion reflects the old adage "out of sight, out of mind." That is, when you are essentially out of the department/college for a good part of the normal 8 to 5 workday it is easy to be unintentionally excluded from day-to-day decisions. This is especially the case when your colleagues are not similarly involved in field-based activities. Unavoidable or unintentional exclusions may result from your inability to attend

department or college/university level committee meetings, and they include such things as staying up-to-date with changes in the codes for the copy machine, meeting deadlines for ordering next semester's textbooks, putting materials on reserve, and scheduling computer labs. Communication with university colleagues and departmental staff may become infrequent and predominately characterized by episodes of "phone tag" and cryptic answering machine messages.

Decreased Productivity A third area of risk, associated predominately with more demanding reimmersion experiences, is their potential to decrease your levels of publications, presentations, and other usual measures of productivity. This is so because the time and energy required for these tasks are likely to be in extremely short supply during a K–12 teaching reimmersion. The strain on your time and energy may make it difficult to meet your obligations to doctoral students, university committees, and other activities associated with your daily life and success as a professor.

Recommendations

Based on our own work and a careful reading of the emerging literature on the risks and rewards of reimmersion experiences (see, for example, Baumann 1995a 1995b; Kochan, 1996; Tom, 1998), we believe that professors who are considering a K–12 reimmersion teaching experience should heed three recommendations.

Recommendation #1: Negotiate the terms of your experience. Without doubt, the most important recommendation is that you negotiate the terms of your K–12 teaching experience with your department head and other faculty. Negotiations with the department head should include a realistic and explicit delineation of the expected outcomes to be gained from your reimmersion. The value you and your department

head attach to these outcomes should be clearly stated and perhaps even equated to other typical products and outcomes of professor's on-campus work. For example, if you specify that your reimmersion will result in a collection of anecdotes suitable for teacher training use, will these be considered equivalent to some other form of course improvement work such as adding a new collection of journal articles to augment the reading lists for your classes? This negotiation of expected credit for clearly defined outcomes helps protect you against having your experience undervalued in decisions regarding raises, promotion, and tenure. Shive (1988) was among the first to sound this alarm when he noted, "Given the demands on professors to conduct research, innovative teaching practices [performed in a field-based PDS methods course] may not have brought rewards commensurate with the time and effort invested" (p. 76). More recently, Tassell (1999) reported research that substantially corroborates this problem.

Another aspect of negotiation with your department head may be a reduction of your existing departmental duties. In negotiating this aspect of your reimmersion experience it is critical that you make provisions to retain those parts of your professional practice you consider to be keys to your maintenance of status in the department, college, and among professional colleagues. For example, it may be better to be given a release from an undergraduate course that you have taught for many years as opposed to giving up a recently acquired doctoral level seminar or some very important committee assignments. Generally speaking, your internal guidelines for promotion, tenure, and annual review can inform your decisions regarding what to forego and what you should seek to maintain during your K–12 reimmersion.

Depending upon the duration and depth of your reimmersion experience, it will also be essential to negotiate, no doubt more gently, your duties in the K–12 classroom. Will your teaching assignment require you to call parents, attend PTA/O, participate in staff meetings, contribute to holiday program activities, stay after school with students, go on a senior trip, or make other contributions of time that go beyond the classroom? Being clear about all aspects of your reimmersion may help you avoid time-draining tasks that hold little pay off for the outcomes you negotiated with your department head.

A final, but no less essential aspect of pre-experience negotiations for a long term K–12 teaching experience, is reconciling potential conflicts over sick leave, vacations, teacher planning days, compensation for substitutes, and what will happen if you become unable to carry out the terms of your reimmersion. What happens, for example, if you get the flu and simply cannot function for several days? What happens if your university's spring break fails to coincide with the school's? Will you work through both weeks? Negotiations over these matters are obviously more important for broad-scope, long-term reimmersion experiences and especially in cases where the K–12 teacher and the professor exchange work assignments for a substantial amount of time. Failure to consider these potentials can result in strained relationships and many other negative consequences.

Recommendation #2: Limit the depth and duration of your experience. Unless teaching K–12 classes is your special cup of tea, we believe it is wise to limit your experience to the minimum necessary to achieve your negotiated goals. For example, if teaching one class for a six week grading period is sufficient to produce many of the outcomes you seek, you should teach no more. Teaching more can only reduce your

productivity at the university and it will most certainly increase your exposure to the risks that go with all reimmersion experiences. Obviously, being clear about your goals and objectives for the reimmersion experience is essential to deciding how much K–12 teaching is enough, but our recommendation is to do only the amount that is essential to your negotiated outcomes.

Recommendation #3: Secure written university and school district approvals for your specific reimmersion experience. This recommendation includes obtaining the necessary university Institutional Review Board research with human subjects clearances and the district's research approval process as well as waivers and releases for disclosure of students' voices, images, and work products as they will be used in presentations, publications, or other contexts such as future university classes. It is prudent to assume that parents, fellow K–12 teachers, and building-level administrators will be highly interested in knowing exactly how they will be represented in any anecdote, video-vignette, workshop, article, or other outcome product you envision. Professional ethics and prevailing practices surrounding copyright laws will impinge on your ability to use the first-hand material you gather as a result of your experience. In this regard it is clear that everyone involved in your reimmersion experience will object to and resist being portrayed in a negative way--even when that portrayal is entirely accurate and completely forgivable. Imagine, for example, that you are videotaping a class when, unexpectedly, a student is caught misbehaving. From a purely detached instructional standpoint such material may be extremely useful in your teacher education classes. However, can you ethically and legally use it? Have the individuals signed releases for the use of their voices, images, and other representations? This is

an especially significant issue if you plan to use materials that could potentially allow others to establish the identities of those who are portrayed.

Conclusion

Our experiences demonstrated that the rewards and risks of a K–12 teaching reimmersion are potentially substantial. The intrinsic rewards of reimmersion are vitally important and they may be substantially augmented by the many potentials reimmersions hold for improved teacher education within your department and college. The risks of reimmersion may be controlled or reduced by limiting the scope and duration of the K–12 teaching experience and by taking the steps needed to secure proper approval for your activities. Negotiating the value of your activities and the products that come from them are essential to securing adequate rewards from your reimmersion experience.

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