



The Up-Side of State Mandates: Moving the Reading Clinic to a High-Need School

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ABSTRACT

In order to comply with the New York State Education Department's (2000) recertification mandates for teacher education programs, the reading clinic of the Master of Science in Literacy Education program at Dowling College, Oakdale, New York was moved to a high-needs school district. This school district was seriously deficient in its pass rate on the NYS English Language Arts tests. The students were predominantly Hispanic, and the census index was 16. This article describes the steps taken to make this move and the challenges, as well as the benefits, of locating the reading clinic in a high-needs school.

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Reluctance to move beyond our comfort zone is a natural response when change is imposed upon us. Paradoxically however, positive experiences often emerge when change occurs. In 2000, the revised New York State Education Department requirements for recertification of teacher preparation programs seemed insurmountable, and the task of complying with them, daunting. Yet the changes we made addressing the mandates have benefited not only us and our graduate students, but a neighboring community as well.

For over twenty years the practicum course/reading clinic of the M. S. in Literacy Education Program at Dowling College had been located at the college campus in Oakdale, New York, where it serviced predominantly Caucasian middle-class children and adolescents. The new requirements for practica courses, however, stipulated that graduate students have experience in high-need schools with socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students who have disabilities, and English language learners (General Requirements for the Registration of all Programs Leading to Classroom Teaching Certificates, Section 52.21 (b) (2) (ii)). To comply with these mandates, we moved the practicum course/reading clinic (Dowling College Literacy Center) to a high-needs school.



The Steps We Took to Move to a High-Needs School

First, via the New York State Education Department's list of high-need schools (Preliminary List of High-Need Districts Eligible for High-Need Supplemental Building Aid Ratio), we determined the high-needs schools in proximity to the college and ultimately selected the Brentwood Union Free School District. Brentwood, a large district with nine elementary schools, four middle schools, and one high school, had been identified by New York State Education Department as seriously deficient in its pass rate on the English Language Arts Tests (*Newsday*, March 18, 2001). It also met other criteria necessary for practicum coursework; it was comprised of predominantly Hispanic students (20.7% African-American, 15% Caucasian, 62.5% Hispanic, and 1.8% other); 19.2% of the students had limited English proficiency; 84.6% of the students received free or reduced price lunch; and the census poverty index was 16 (A Report to the Governor and Legislature on the Educational Status of the State's Schools: Submitted July 2005).

The second step was to explain to the college administrators our plan to move the Dowling College Literacy Center to Brentwood. Because the operating expenses of our program had traditionally been offset by revenue from the children's registration fees, we were not sure if the college would be able to continue to provide its financial support. Understanding that the new state regulations were mandatory, however, they suggested that we compensate for lost revenue through grant money for which we could apply.

A more important consideration for those of us running the clinic was philosophical; we simply were not sure if Brentwood, whose district philosophy of reading instruction was different from that of our M. S. in Literacy Education Program, would be amenable to the partnership. Specifically, Brentwood's K through 3 reading program, *Assured Readiness for Learning* (McGinnis, 1981), placed a heavy emphasis on phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction. Courses in the M. S. in Literacy Education Program, on the other hand, were based on a balanced approach to literacy learning. Our graduate students learned to provide reading and writing activities based on students' interests and, in this context, to teach students reading strategies both as needed and one-to-one. In addition to teaching phonics through direct instruction, they also learned to teach phonetic skills in context while a student is reading.

To determine if Brentwood would be a viable location for our program, we met with Brentwood's Superintendent and the Language Arts Director. When we explained our philosophy of reading instruction, we added that we would also make the graduate students knowledgeable about the *Assured Readiness for Learning* reading program so that our approaches would complement and enhance the children's reading development.

One of the things we were happiest to discuss was our vision for the mutually beneficial partnership we were about to undertake; we would prepare teachers to improve the literacy development of Brentwood students, while Brentwood students would raise their English Language Arts test scores. Unfortunately, we had to add that only English speaking students would be eligible to work with the graduate students, since none were enrolled in a TESL program.

We pointed out that our program included a full-time faculty member who was the director, an assistant director, a program administrator, adjunct faculty members,



supervisors, a secretary, and a translator. We explained that during each fall and spring college semester, we would provide Brentwood students with one-hour, individual literacy assessment and instructional sessions, as well as a writing workshop. In addition, we would obtain liability insurance to cover the program and develop registration forms and a brochure that explained the program to Brentwood teachers and parents.

The superintendent and language arts director readily agreed to our proposed plan. The district would provide both a middle school building and the support services necessary--a technology supervisor, janitors, and security personnel--to carry out the program.

Meeting the Challenges

During the five years of the Dowling College Literacy Center's location at the North Middle School, we have experienced both challenges and benefits. When we left the college campus and lost easy access to curriculum resources, duplicating services, video equipment, and a bookstore, we purchased a copy machine, a television/vcr, sets of leveled books, and supply closets for these materials. The district has been very accommodating in providing space for these materials. Storage evolved from a tiny area in an office to a large hallway space to our own small resource room. In return, we share the television/VCR with the school.

Maintaining a large number of available literacy supervisors for a Saturday program and the time required to train them had always been a challenge. Because of the additional travel time when we moved to Brentwood, many of the literacy supervisors did not return, and we had to hire inexperienced supervisors who required on-going training. It also seemed that the move away from the college campus resulted in a loss of the prestige of working in a college. Supervisors would now be working in a public school on Saturday, which was similar to what they did the other five days of the week. The new supervisors we hired to work with us in North Middle School hadn't worked at the college and therefore didn't feel demoted.

Our move to Brentwood's North Middle School resulted in additional responsibilities. In several instances, faculty and staff members disagreed about who should assume these new tasks. Not surprisingly, some wanted to do more, while others wanted to do less. To provide better organization and efficiency, we delineated in writing the job responsibilities of each faculty and staff member.

In some instances, the required number of clock hours that graduate students had to instruct their students became difficult to meet because, due to issues with transportation, work schedules, and baby-sitting, Brentwood students had a high absence and dropout rate. To address the problem, we gave parents a specific attendance policy that included provisions for dropping a student who had more than two absences. When a Brentwood student dropped out, we replaced this student with a student on our wait list, which is maintained by a Brentwood faculty member who serves as a liaison between the college and the school district.

Although we had a translator on Saturdays, and although all our forms and letters for parents were written in both English and Spanish, off-premises communication with non-English speaking parents was sometimes problematic. Since our program secretary



was bilingual, students who needed a translator during the week could contact her for assistance during her regular work hours.

Because other groups including sports teams, P.T.A. and A.A. also used North Middle School on Saturdays, we sometimes lost the use of the cafeteria. More importantly, a security problem arose. On several occasions items were missing from teachers' classrooms and we were questioned. Since supervisors were usually present in the classrooms with graduate students and their students, we did not believe anyone in our program was responsible. With the continued positive impact of the program, Brentwood began to limit outside groups, and on most Saturdays we had sole use of the building, which eliminated security problems.

College administrators do not always understand the complexities of the practicum course in an off-site location and the need for an increased budget for materials/resources and additional staff. On-going dialogue, the Dean's participation in our literacy celebration, and reports of the success of the program helped administrators see the need for a wide range of support.

The Benefits for Our Program

When our practicum course/Dowling College Literacy Center was located at the college, the use of faculty members' offices for literacy sessions created problems for faculty, graduate students and children. Some faculty members refused the use of their offices and others complained that items were not returned to their original locations. The children who attended the program had to go on an elevator to the third floor of a college building to meet the graduate students in small, windowless offices that were usually cluttered with piles of papers and books. In contrast, when graduate students worked with their students in the middle school classrooms, it seemed more like real school to them. Children also had an increased opportunity to see "school" in a positive light because their reading and writing activities were based on their interests.

The middle school provided a consistent setting for our program. When we were located at the college campus, the increasing number of graduate students enrolled in the course necessitated additional rooms for literacy sessions, discussion groups, and seminars. Because the college rooms were also used for other courses and special events, we had to schedule rooms for our program very far in advance of the semester for which we needed them. We often found, however, that the rooms we needed had already been taken, and as a result, our program had to spread to the library and the ceremonial rooms. In the new setting, we could more easily plan ahead, knowing the layout of the school and the number and types of rooms available for use.

The New York State regulations changed certification from K-12 to two literacy certifications, birth through 6th grade and 5th grade through 12th grade. When our practicum course/Dowling College Literacy Center was held at the college campus, the children who attended the program had been predominantly elementary school age. Because the Brentwood School District provided a large population, graduate students could now instruct youngsters in the grade range of their literacy certification.



The most obvious benefit of locating our course/program in a high-need school was that it met New York State Education Department's requirement that we prepare graduate students to work with students who met their population criteria.

The reputation our program has gained in the Brentwood community is a definite benefit. Parents who want their children to succeed in school but can't afford tutoring are grateful for the free reading and writing instruction our program provides. Some families walk to the program to overcome the issue of transportation. Many parents have shared with us their delight in seeing their children's interest in reading the books they bring home. The non-English speaking parents know that a translator is always available, eliminating feelings of alienation or discomfort when they enter the school.

The Benefits for Graduate Students

Since the predominant ethnic background of the graduate students in our program is Caucasian, locating the practicum course in the Brentwood School District afforded them hands-on exposure to varied cultural, socioeconomic, and language issues. One third-grade girl, Tiara, who recently had to live with a foster family because her parents could no longer care for her, attended the program for several semesters. Since each semester we paired the same supervisor with the graduate student who worked with Tiara, the supervisor helped each new graduate student understand Tiara's fluctuating moods and the impact missing her family had on her desire to read and write. We found that it helped graduate students better plan for their students when their supervisor knew the children and their family situations. For this reason, whenever possible, we paired graduate students with a supervisor who knew the children with whom they would be working.

Since the new regulations also required an increase in the clock hours that graduate students worked with their students, we added a one hour writing workshop to our practicum course. The graduate students who were working with two consecutive grade levels (e. g., 3rd and 4th grades) participated in writing workshop as one group. Each week a graduate student would model and explain a writing craft lesson appropriate for where the students were in their writing process. Students and graduate students wrote for approximately 20 to 30 minutes and then shared their writing. After the children left, the graduate students and supervisors would reflect on what occurred and plan for the subsequent writing workshop based on the children's needs.

During one writing workshop with third and fourth grade students, a graduate student drew a large heart on the board and wrote in it the memories that touch her heart (Heard, 1981). She then read to the children a story she had written about a special memory. The children discussed their memories, drew hearts with their memories, and then wrote about a memory. Children wrote about pets they once had, a present that was special to them, or friends. Maria wrote about how her uncle had been shot. The room fell silent as we listened to her story. Graduate students and supervisors shared Maria's pain and began to understand some of the difficult issues with which Maria and many other children cope.

Another surprising, writing workshop took place when a graduate student's craft lesson for fifth and sixth grade students included his very visual expression of writing



through a mask. As he donned costumes and assumed the personae of a hula dancer, martial arts expert, and monkey, the graduate student modeled stories from each character's point of view. The children embraced the concept, dug into his bag of wigs, hats and assorted props, and wrote long stories to share. Together this writers' workshop demonstrated the joy of writing to the children and the joy of teaching to the graduate students.

Through their participation in writing workshop, graduate students gained an increased understanding of students with different socioeconomic backgrounds and learned how to present craft lessons for these students' specific needs. Additionally, they learned how to set up a writing workshop in their own classrooms.

We devoted one seminar to displaying and discussing the criteria for evaluating and selecting multicultural literature for specific students. Graduate students learned about the importance of having their students read books about children of their own background. When children don't see themselves in books, they may not relate to books. One graduate student related that Francesca's face lit up as she read *The Cat's Meow* (Soto, 1985), a short chapter book about a Hispanic girl and her cat who speaks in Spanish. Francesca loved her own cat so this was the perfect book to motivate her to read and then to write about her own cat.

On their way to North Middle School, graduate students came to know their students' community—their houses, their churches, their stores, their ethnic foods. Family members who came to pick up and drop off the children often shared some of their life circumstances with the graduate students.

Of all the benefits of the program, the culminating literacy celebration is consistently the most joyous occasion for all. The Brentwood students share with their families, graduate students, the other Brentwood students, and Literacy Center faculty the books they have written and read, and the projects they have created. During one literacy celebration when a nine-year-old read a book he had written describing his love of his family members, the family cried, but everyone else in the audience cried, too. The families then expressed their great appreciation for their sons' and daughters' accomplishments. Reading and writing had mattered.

Graduate students come away from our program with not only their increased understanding of literacy assessment and instruction, but also with genuine literacy experiences shared with others.

Our program continues to evolve, and even though new challenges will arise, the benefits of moving from academia to a public school are worth the potential setbacks. The paradox of change remains true, it would seem. Change is difficult, no doubt, but it is shaped in possibility.



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