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The Outdoor School Inspires Potentially Highly Qualified Middle Level Teachers

* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Patricia A. Watson & Walter Doué

I went to Junction not knowing if teaching was for me. I left Junction knowing there was nothing better for me.

–Block 1 teacher candidate, fall 2004

Take 50 university education students who may not be quite sure they want to be teachers. Pour them all into a charter bus, and drive them five hours to a remote Texas Hill Country location. Mix in equal parts of enthusiasm and dedication, well-planned interdisciplinary curriculum, and face-to-face interaction with middle level students. Let simmer in the October sun by the Llano River. Watch while the mixture swells with confidence, commitment, and community.

Like many great recipes, the perfect mix of ingredients was discovered as much by accident as by conscious intent when the middle level program at Texas Tech University's (TTU) College of Education and the outdoor school at Texas Tech's Junction, Texas, campus partnered to provide an intensive three-day introduction to field experiences for teacher candidates. The partnership was designed to begin the preparation of high-quality middle level teachers through a developmentally appropriate field-based experience. The results exceeded the expectations of everyone connected with the project.

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, the position statement of the National

Middle School Association (2003a), stated that the culture of successful schools includes "educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so" (p. 9). The state of Texas began licensing teachers with specific middle level (4–8) preparation in 2002. The TTU College of Education certified its first middle level teacher candidates in 2003. As in many other middle level teacher preparation programs, the faculty at TTU finds it a continuing challenge to provide clinical experiences at developmentally responsive middle school sites (National Middle School Association, 2003b). Notably absent from the field experiences was an opportunity to observe and experience the interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum recommended by the National Middle School Association (2003a) and Jackson and Davis (2000). Many of the partner schools where TTU students complete field experiences remain rooted in the discipline-focused junior high school or traditional K–6 elementary school structures. As Cooney (2000) found, "The problem is that middle grades teachers are prepared to teach content or to teach children. Rarely are they prepared to teach ... challenging content [to] young adolescents" (p. 7). This is certainly the case in West Texas, where middle level certification is new, and middle level reform has been largely absent from public school policy considerations. The three-day field experience opportunity at the outdoor school provided a brief opportunity to observe carefully planned instruction that integrated standards from science, social studies, mathematics, and language arts. But there were benefits of the experience that extended far beyond learning about curriculum integration that have made the outdoor school experience an integral part of the preparation of quality teachers for the middle grades at Texas Tech University.

The preparation of highly qualified middle level teachers

The definition of "highly qualified" has been much debated since the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandated that every teacher working in a public school be highly qualified. Highly qualified under NCLB means that a teacher is certified and has demonstrated proficiency in his subject matter. A joint position statement issued by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Middle School Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) recommended a balanced approach to teacher quality. The statement stressed that knowing how to teach content effectively to young adolescents is as important as content knowledge itself, the latter emphasized by NCLB. To achieve this balance, students in the middle level program at TTU first complete a rigorous sequence of courses in their content disciplines. Teacher candidates then enter the teacher education program during the fall semester of their junior year. As recommended by the National Middle School Association's Position Statement on Professional Preparation of Middle Level Teachers, teacher candidates engage in early and continuing field experiences to provide a context for learning about the development of young adolescents and developmentally responsive instruction and assessment (NMSA, 2003a). Veteran and newly certified teachers alike see field experience as a powerful element of teacher preparation. However, research has shown that many teacher preparation programs include field experiences that are not well coordinated with the university-based components of teacher education. In addition, finding placements is sometimes challenging, and "identifying schools that share educational perspectives with teacher education programs can be

an issue" (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001, p. ii). The middle level program at TTU was no exception. However, an emerging theme in the research on field experience shows that field experience activities that are focused and well structured can lead to more significant learning on the part of teacher candidates and their future students (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). When the administration of the outdoor school at the TTU Junction Campus approached the field experience office in the College of Education about the possibility for building a collaborative partnership, the middle level program faculty saw this as a great opportunity to create a structured and well-organized field experience that would serve as a consistent introduction for middle level teacher candidates.

The outdoor school

The outdoor school is a program of the TTU Junction Campus. The 400-acre campus is located on the banks of the Llano River in the heart of Texas Hill Country. The richness of the flora and fauna found at the site make it an ideal outdoor laboratory.

As part of the outdoor school program, Texas students, primarily in grades four through eight, are provided with a four-day, three-night, hands-on residential experience. Students and classroom teachers stay in dormitories and screened bunk houses on campus, where outdoor instructors create an individualized week filled with science, math, social studies, reading, and writing curriculum. The curriculum is based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (www.tea.state.tx.us/teks). All instruction is provided using hands-on, real-world experiences. The students become scientists, exercising curiosity and using ideas of their own to accomplish required tasks.



A collaborative partnership

During their first semester in the middle level program, TTU students enroll in an adolescent development course and a course on middle level curriculum and philosophy. Initially, program faculty and staff saw the outdoor school experience as an opportunity to observe and work with young adolescents that would allow teacher candidates to reflect on the "implications of developmental realities" (NMSA, 2003b). In addition, the curriculum taught at the outdoor school provided TTU teacher candidates with an opportunity to observe integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum that was firmly grounded in the state curriculum standards. Two weeks prior to the Junction trip, Outdoor School Coordinator Kaycie Sullivan visited the university classes, preparing the students for what they would observe at the outdoor school. Although many of the university students had previously expressed reluctance about traveling to the outdoor school for three days, Kaycie's infectious enthusiasm recruited all but a small handful. She gave the students a quick overview of the curriculum they would see taught and briefed them on their responsibilities and expectations. Middle level program faculty viewed the Junction experience as the introductory step in a sequence of increasing complexity that would culminate during the student teaching

semester, two years away. Teacher candidates at Junction were expected to be participant observers, interacting with middle level students, but holding no responsibility for planning or delivering instruction.

The Junction experience

University students from the College of Education traveled by bus to the Hill Country campus. On the bus ride down, a number of students discussed their nervousness at beginning their field experience in local public schools. These assignments were to begin the next week. Upon arrival at the campus, TTU students were greeted by Kaycie Sullivan and her staff. The TTU students moved into dormitory housing and then joined local public school students and teachers in the dining hall for dinner. Two classes of fifth grade students from two different Central Texas school districts were in attendance at the outdoor school, so the TTU teacher candidates were divided into two groups and partnered with fifth graders.

Later that evening, the university students were briefed in an orientation meeting, then observed and participated in activities with the public school students, including teambuilding activities. Students at the outdoor school are constantly immersed in situations that require them to solve problems, use their leadership skills, and work together as a group. Students are first exposed to initiatives requiring a minimal level of communication, cooperation, and commitment. Juggling a tennis ball, balancing a marble, and creating shapes with a rope are all used to ascertain the group's skills and abilities. Activities on a low ropes course then build on the initiatives and require students to work more as a team.

Throughout the day Thursday, TTU teacher candidates observed and participated with their fifth grade partners. Using varied tools like collecting nets, mark/recapture techniques, and Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology along with the traditional tools of a field scientist, students learned to draw conclusions based on data they collected in the field. Testing water quality, plotting aquatic and forest data, orienteering, and observing flora and fauna were all part of the exhausting day. Impressed, one TTU teacher candidate described the activities.

Every kid had their own tools. In fact, when they went outside, they had backpacks that were numbered, and they had all their temperature reading tools for the ground and the GPS system. At times there were assignments done outside of the classroom, so when they were outside, they were all writing down what the temperature was and information like that.

Throughout the day, Kaycie and the outdoor school staff met periodically with the TTU students, debriefing and answering questions. The culminating activity was an owl watch using a recorded CD to call the great horned owls that inhabit the woods of the campus, followed by another group meeting to discuss the day and set the stage for the next morning.

Friday's curriculum was centered on social studies. Students experienced what it was like to be a pioneer in Central Texas in the early 1900s. Cutting with a cross-cut saw, planting seeds, shaving wood, cultivating a field, roping, making candles, washing clothes, and hauling water were all activities used to bring history alive. TTU students observed and participated until after the chuck wagon lunch, when it was time to board the bus for the long trip back to campus.

Throughout the three-day experience, teacher candidates were provided with multiple opportunities to observe the behavior and developmental characteristics of a diverse group of young adolescents. One TTU student reflected:

I think that one of the things I've come back with from Junction is that, whether I am there to teach the kids or to guide them, it is important. The biggest thing I learned, too, is that kids are so much smarter than we give them credit for.

Reflecting on the diverse student population observed at the outdoor school, another teacher candidate commented:

We had this really interactive community with so many different kinds of kids. ... Not every student is going to say, "Okay, teacher, I am ready to learn." The diversity of children makes this opportunity to learn so important. Some of these kids are so smart, but they just don't fit into the box.

Teaching outside of the box and the developmentally responsive nature of interdisciplinary instruction were also observed by teacher candidates visiting the outdoor school. One teacher candidate recalled the experience saying,

There wasn't a subject we didn't touch. I mean, you name a subject, and we did it, somehow. Granted, we never said, "OK, now we're in social studies," but it was integrated into whatever we were doing. We could never have a better way of learning.

Research in teacher preparation has shown that the teacher candidates' entering beliefs about teaching, learning, and subject matter are difficult to change. In addition, studies have shown that when beginning teachers become overwhelmed, they often revert to the norms of the schools in which they were taught (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Many of the TTU teacher candidates come from very traditional Texas public school backgrounds. Their experiences at the outdoor school caused at least some of them to question the value of their prior experiences and wonder about their upcoming field experience in public schools.

We heard one of the teachers at Junction say that if we pass by a classroom and you see questions being asked, and the kids are jumping things out at the teacher,

then something is being done right. I've never seen that style of learning, so I wonder how our ideas of teaching are going to affect us when we go back into the classroom with the old fashioned style of teachers.

In classes throughout the students' first two semesters, their observations of the active approach to learning were brought up time and time again. It seems that the outdoor school observations are serving as a grounding experience for many students, one that they can hold onto throughout their four semesters in the teacher education program.

Unanticipated benefits

Although the Junction experience fully met the program faculty's goals for providing well structured field experiences related to adolescent development and interdisciplinary curriculum, observations during the three-day experience and debriefing following the trip revealed that teacher candidates benefited from their experiences at the outdoor school in unanticipated ways. In classes throughout the semester and into their second block of courses, Junction observations were used as examples time and time again. The brief experience had affected teacher candidates' growth toward becoming quality teachers. The unanticipated benefits included increased confidence, commitment to teaching, and sense of community within the cohort of teacher candidates.

Increased confidence and self-efficacy

It is common for teacher candidates entering their first semester of field experience to exhibit anxiety and a lack of confidence prior to their first in-school experiences. However, it was not apparent how strong these feelings were until the university students were asked to discuss their experiences at the outdoor school. Speaking of this anxiety, one student said:

One thing for sure is that I am real timid. I didn't know if teaching is what I want to do. I was really kind of nervous about starting my school experience, but once we were there in Junction and the instructors said, "Okay, you will interact with kids." Then we went over to our group of kids, and it was great. ... It just gave me a pound of confidence to go into this. ... Once I got back from Junction, I knew this is what I wanted to do, and I was so excited to start my whole teaching experience.

Almost two semesters later, while discussing confidence building with middle school students, one professor asked the teacher candidates to identify experiences that had built their own self-confidence in their ability to teach. She was surprised when the experiences at the outdoor school were listed first by a majority of the students. This increased confidence was a benefit program faculty had not predicted when initially planning the Junction experience.

The influence of the experiences at the outdoor school extended beyond confidence building. It

seems that teacher candidates' positive experiences there increased their sense of self-efficacy as well. Self-efficacy refers to "beliefs about one's abilities to learn or perform behaviors at certain levels (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs are important considerations in the development of highly qualified teachers because these beliefs affect the amount of effort people expend in a situation and how long they will persevere in the face of adverse conditions (Pajares, 2002). People with low self-efficacy may believe that "things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters anxiety, stress, depression, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem" (Pajares, 2002, p. 6). People who doubt their capabilities have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they wish to pursue (Bandura, 1994). In the case of the experiences at the outdoor school, self-efficacy beliefs were developed through the vicarious experience of observing others performing tasks. According to Pajares (2002), observation of the performance of successful individuals is particularly effective when people are uncertain about their own abilities, or when they have limited prior experience. Kaycie Sullivan, director and head instructor, proved to be a powerful role model for the teacher candidates. Throughout the three-day experience, teacher candidates observed Kaycie's energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to her students. They watched as she masterfully handled difficult students. One TTU student asserted:

Those people that went on this trip not knowing if they wanted to become a teacher—this trip should have defined it for them. I have always wanted to be a teacher, but now it is more [as though] I want to be a teacher like Kaycie. I want to be the best teacher I can be. Now teaching is confirmed, and I want to teach my students in a way that allows them to get on a pathway that they feel good about.

According to Pajares (2002), vicarious experiences are especially powerful when observers watch models with perceived similar attributes succeed.

It just really gives me the chill bumps how Kaycie is into it with those kids. She is so energetic. I think that kind of made us see where we can be better teachers. ... It made us think, "If she could do it, then we can do it." Kaycie would teach and have fun all at the same time.

Kaycie Sullivan's philosophy is teaching with the understanding that the brain plays an integral part in students' learning. Jensen (1998) defined brain-based education as a multidisciplinary approach based on what is currently known about how our brain learns. Sullivan stated:

Teachers should teach to the brain using stimulation, movement, excitement, memorization techniques, and real applications of concepts. ... A teacher must understand each of her learners and teach each concept in many different ways for every learner to understand. ... Learning engages the whole body, the search for understanding is innate. ... Learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat, and each brain is unique. We must fully immerse and engage learners

(Personal communication, July, 2005).

Middle grades specialist Powell (2005) stressed that this emphasis on challenging and interactive teaching and learning is an excellent fit with the middle level philosophy of developmental responsiveness. At Junction, the TTU teacher candidates received an invaluable snapshot view of developmentally responsive instruction. The vicarious experience of these instructional successes, in turn, led the teacher candidates to perceive their own potential for success in the classroom as highly qualified teachers.

Increased community within the cohort

Teaching has long been characterized as the lonely profession (Goodlad, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Traditionally, teacher preparation programs have focused on the development of teacher candidates' knowledge and competencies related to teaching and their content disciplines, rather than the development of a community of learners (Goodlad, 1990; Putnam & Borko, 2000). This focus is being perpetuated by the NCLB emphasis on content expertise as the major determinant of competence and quality. Arhar and Crowe (2002) and the Holmes Group (1995) recommended cohorts as a more communal and coherent approach to teacher education that would facilitate professional learning and socialization. This cohort approach would provide a support group of students sharing a common experience that would form their own small learning community. The three-day experience at the outdoor school contributed greatly to this sense of building a community of learners within the cohort—a format used by the middle level program at TTU. One preservice teacher, a nontraditional transfer student, reflected:

This is my first year at Tech so I don't know anyone. This trip to Junction helped me learn my classmates, instead of not knowing anybody except for those people in your group when you do a group project. We got to know a lot of people in our block. I know now that I can say what I am really feeling without sitting there and trying to figure out how I want to word it first. I can come right out and say it.

The preservice teachers became more relaxed with their peers, and this promoted a more complex bonding and emotional support avenue within their cohort. Several of the preservice teachers commented on how relaxed they are within their block/cohort since returning from their experience. Throughout the year, professors commented on the tightly knit relationships that had developed within the cohort. Looking to the future, the teacher candidates expressed that they now belong to a core group of educators with whom they can make contact and discuss successes and frustrations. This appreciation for a collaborative learning community that began with their experiences at the outdoor school should serve the teacher candidates well as they move through the preparation and induction process. Collaborative team structures have been linked to gains in achievement, higher-quality solutions to problems, and increased confidence (Little & Shulman, 1984), so early and continuing experiences which build these collaborative environments are key to the development of highly qualified middle level teachers.

Looking to the future: Taking the Junction experience into the classroom

Four semesters later as they were completing their student teaching semester, a small group of students were asked to informally reflect on the Junction experience. The six students agreed that the experiences from Junction had affected their development as teachers, right up through student teaching. One student commented on the elements of interdisciplinary instruction they had observed:

Everything was so connected. You had language arts, social studies, science, everything, even math. Everything was one deal. Like when we went to the lab, and they did the dichotomy chart, and it was tied to everything. That was really cool, because I don't know if I would have had a good picture of [interdisciplinary instruction] without seeing it. We learned about it in books, but we didn't see it [in classrooms].

All six students interviewed listed elements of instructional delivery and classroom management, borrowed from Kaycie and the Junction staff, that had found their way into the student teaching classroom. One student teacher said:

I think, in part, what makes it so exciting is the "hands-on" and the way [the kids] were so excited, and they took to it so much. It encouraged me to do hands-on activities and not to be afraid, because some teachers think we can't do hands-on because there are too many kids, and it will get out of control. But, *no*. If it's something they're interested in, then they are going to monitor their own behavior.

Another student responded:

I heard a lot of students saying they had fun learning because it was fun; it wasn't just sitting at a desk taking notes and looking at the board. From day one it goes back to procedures, and I think that's why it works so well. As soon as they get [to the outdoor school] students know exactly what to do. They establish that so students know what to expect.

Summing up their experiences, one of the student teachers commented:

The excitement that we felt at the end of it has not worn off (agreement from other student teachers in interview). I still want to be the kind of passionate energetic teacher that I saw there. And it kicked off, having it at the beginning of our program. It made us that much more excited to begin and start our whole education experience. It sure would be fun to go back (enthusiastic agreement).

Including the outdoor school at Junction as part of the initial field experiences for middle level teacher candidates was at first viewed as a unique and interesting means for introducing interdisciplinary instruction. The experience, however, provided a solid basis on which to build confidence, commitment, and community within the cohort of preservice teachers. Currently, ongoing funding has been acquired that will ensure that the introductory three-day visit to the outdoor school becomes a consistent and continuing part of the middle level field experience sequence for all cohorts in the program. Through this experience, we hope to send out into the teaching world middle level teacher candidates who will provide each other with mutual support and who will have a collective commitment to becoming highly qualified middle level teachers with a professional commitment to creating caring communities for active learning within their own schools.

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