

Caught in a Bind: Student Teaching in a Climate of State Reform

By Janet Ferguson & Beverly Brink

Student teaching may require student teachers to address the demands of two masters that often have very different expectations and philosophies. They are caught in a bind of being expected to implement methods advocated in university coursework while also being expected to fit into the classroom to which they are assigned. This bind is further complicated by the tensions inherent in school reform efforts. As schools try to meet the needs of every child, they have adopted all manner of innovations, very often competing with each other. For instance, multi-age classrooms can be instituted in districts that also prescribe leveled readers and ability grouping of children for instruction, ultimately defeating the purpose of multi-age classroom configurations. University expectations to implement literature-based assignments within a highly complex classroom such as a multi-age classroom can be further complicated by myriad demands on the student teacher.

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In keeping with national trends, the State of Washington has mandated state standards, benchmarks, and high stakes testing at the fourth, seventh, and tenth grade levels. Test results are publicly reported by grade level, school, and district. Beginning in 2008, students unable to achieve mastery on the state

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mandated test will be denied a high school diploma. As a result, many schools carefully craft the curriculum to align with state standards and to ensure that students pass the state standards test. Schools serving large numbers of poor students, students whose first language is not English, and minority students who traditionally do not perform well on standardized tests are under particular pressure to raise test scores to expected levels.

Within this environment, we offer a social constructivist program of preservice teacher education on a branch campus of the state land grant university. Our program allows students to earn a Master's in Teaching (MIT) degree and K-8 certification. Our constructivist approach, in contrast to approaches based on teachers transmitting knowledge, requires preservice students to be active participants in the formation of their own intellectual development and to evaluate their performance in terms of its effects on children, school, and society. The social nature of learning is strongly emphasized. Conversely, some educators believe that children who are at risk for school failure need structured, skill and drill types of reading and writing activities and offer direct instruction based on workbooks, basal readers, phonics drills, penmanship exercises, and writing experiences that focus on form rather than function (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). Student teachers whose coursework emphasizes social constructivism may suffer great anxiety in student teaching and may be judged ill prepared by mentor teachers and administrators who subscribe to such approaches.

State educational reform with its emphasis on standards, testing, and increased accountability has also exacerbated the dilemma of teacher educators. We also may be caught in a bind of competing beliefs when designing coursework. For example, literacy courses include a component to familiarize preservice students with the standards, benchmarks, evaluation procedures, and the lexicon of reform used by the state. Of more concern, however, is the diminished view of the teacher as curriculum maker who adapts to meet the strengths, needs, and interests of a particular group of children. New teachers will not be hired, we are told, for their ability to be creative, innovative, attuned to the needs of children or knowledgeable about how children learn but for their willingness to implement a curriculum designed by committees that align well with what will be tested in fourth, seventh and tenth grade. In the words of one principal, "Our teachers are not independent contractors."

This study took place at a suburban K-6 school that serves a large percentage of children considered at risk for school failure due to their poverty status. Following a Qualitative Case Study design (Stake, 1995), our purpose was to describe a challenging student teaching context and investigate the outcomes for the student teachers.

Literacy Coursework

In keeping with social constructivist philosophy, the literacy coursework in our MIT program is designed to prepare preservice teachers to implement a literacy

program that has meaning making at its core. Reading and writing are viewed as mutually supportive interactive processes that are most successfully undertaken within the context of authentic communication. The program embraces a transactional model where learners are viewed as having rich prior knowledge and background and bring an innate ability and inclination to construct their own knowledge (Weaver, 1994). Student teachers operating out of the social constructivist view try to create rich environmental contexts and situations from which students can learn.

Our literacy course is blocked with a Social Context course to emphasize the social nature of learning. An emphasis on Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) of the ecological nature of human development helps our MIT students understand the many layers of social influence on children.

Supervision of Student Teachers

In supervising student teachers, we strive to be consistent with our constructivist goals by allowing student teachers to construct their own knowledge about learning and teaching, by adopting the role of supervisor-as-collaborator in creating knowledge about teaching and learning; by using a variety of data sources; and by taking a holistic approach over a series of lessons unfolding in an instructional cycle (Curley, 1999). We observe and conference with each student teacher weekly, and our weekly group seminars often include the mentor teachers.

Placement Site

This K-6 elementary school is located in a rural/suburban area with a high percentage of working class families. It offers unique opportunities for studying student teachers' integration of literacy theory and practice in the field experience. There are a large percentage of children who have a high probability of educational failure due to their poverty status. It is a Title I school that has several block-grant programs including a breakfast program, summer reading program, after school program, weekly volunteer reading tutors, and a homework room which assists students with social and educational support from the staff and the community. The pressures of state mandated standards testing are strongly felt by teachers and administrators. Literacy instruction generally follows a transmission model directed by the teacher. Most students are expected to learn the same things at the same time. It is quite likely that the state mandated standards testing has increased teachers' emphasis on individual accountability and "doing one's own work."

Participants and Data Collection

Two student teachers, Helen and Betty, who live near the school were placed there and volunteered to participate in the research project, which did not require any extra work of them. Their mentor teachers were Toni and Darlene, veteran teacher leaders in the school.

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The student teachers' supervisor's observation and conference field notes from the supervision sessions were maintained throughout the school year (Wolcott, 1995). These notes tracked student teachers' areas of professional focus and goals, implementation actions, interactions with children and mentor teacher, and plans for moving forward (Curley, 1999). The student teachers kept dialogue journals as a method of promoting and assessing their reflectivity (Bolin, 1988). The literacy professor made field notes of direct observation of the student teachers and of participant observation with the principal, student teachers, mentor teachers, and children. Interviews of student teachers and interviews of mentor teachers were conducted during the fall semester and at the end of student teaching. Interviews were partially transcribed. Documents such as coursework assignments, lesson plans, school policies and program descriptions were also collected. Data were prepared and analyzed according to established qualitative methods (Erickson, 1986; Wolcott, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Data Analysis and Findings

Helen

Helen was placed in a fourth grade classroom with mentor teacher, Toni, who had sixteen years of teaching experience. Helen described Toni's instructional style as "teacher-oriented" where directions were clear and expectations for quality work were high. She described the mentor teacher's strengths as "structured, organized, and caring". Children were expected to comply with her rules. Work was to be completed individually with minimal movement and conversation. Her rationale for this instructional stance was that the state standards test demands "independent thinking."

In this classroom, five children were being medicated for Attention Deficit Disorder; one child was labeled Mildly Mentally Retarded and reading levels reportedly ranged from first to sixth grade. Pullout programs were intended to support the learning of children who were deemed behind grade level expectations. There was a reliance on textbooks, worksheets, kits, and the Accelerated Reader program. Candy was readily given out as a reward for compliant behavior and work that met the teacher's standards. Due to her "training as a special education teacher", Toni had systems to track students' misbehaviors and delinquent assignments. This documentation was utilized in briefing the principal and parents on students' progress, or lack thereof.

Helen was often left in charge of the classroom as Toni met regularly with the principal regarding a child labeled Behaviorally Disordered. Helen often expressed concern about this, fearful of the amount of responsibility she was given and both the legal and the ethical consequences of "messing up" due to her inexperience.

Initially Toni assumed that Helen would teach in much the same way that Toni taught. In the beginning, Helen complained to her university supervisor about the "mismatch" of teaching styles and whether she could "fit in." She was eager to

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please Toni and concerned about being able to “cover the material” in the same way that Toni did. On September 28, Helen wrote,

I have been thinking about the type of classroom that I am working in and the type of classroom that I would like to have. The classroom that I am placed in is more direct instruction and independent working. I feel that it is important to have some direct instruction. Some things need to be taught step by step but most often the teacher needs to guide the children’s learning and let them explore their thinking and work in groups or with partners on fun, exploratory, active projects.

However, as the fall semester progressed, Toni became more willing to allow Helen to use her own teaching style and methods. On November 14, Helen wrote,

I enjoy having time to run the classroom by myself. This gives me opportunities to reinforce my own skills, practice monitoring, handle problematic situations, and implement some of the ways that I would have children participate. I feel more comfortable to do things and handle situations the way I would in my own classroom. I don’t have to always be worrying that I will be contradicting what Toni would say or do.

Toni was also very supportive and frequently complimented Helen publicly. She found many ways of calling attention to Helen’s competence with the student teaching supervisor, other university visitors to the campus, the principal, and other teachers. She would often say, “I’m so lucky to have Helen (in my classroom).”

Betty

Betty was placed in a K-2 classroom of 54 students with Darlene. This class was taught by two teachers, only one of whom was involved in mentoring her. Betty described Darlene’s strengths as “the ability to think ahead, flexibility, spontaneity and enthusiasm, and classroom management techniques.” Of the 54 children enrolled in the class, one was labeled Behaviorally Disordered and two were labeled Developmentally Delayed. Betty also noted “many children from dysfunctional family environments” that include drug abuse and jailed parents. There seemed to be a loss of empathy for the situations of many children and an almost ‘punishing’ attitude toward them.

Betty initially described the classroom as “teacher directed” but “somewhat chaotic” as the 54 children were flexibly grouped and regrouped throughout the two adjoining classrooms. Generally an effort was made to group older children with younger children so the older ones could “model” behaviors for the younger children. For the first months of student teaching, Betty had difficulty learning the many names and the complicated routines and schedules of this classroom. The frequent use of phonics worksheets was a real problem for her. Although a definite management system was in place, Betty observed, “teaching was often interrupted” by the need to redirect children to appropriate behaviors and routines. A token economy of stickers accumulated toward a reward from the “goodie box” was utilized.

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Although the mentor teacher subscribed mainly to skills-based teaching herself, she indicated she was entirely open to Betty trying out methods of her choice. Following Darlene's practice, Betty was required to have the first grade students complete a phonics worksheet every day. Initially she had a difficult time managing the classroom. The children who were bored and/or unable to complete the worksheets independently often misbehaved. In her November 30 journal, Betty wrote,

I had my first chance to teach phonics but I don't think it went too well. The ones closest to the math calendar wall kept turning around to play with the wall objects. Others toward the back of the circle were playing with each other or turning around to watch the second graders do math.

With help from her supervisor, Betty found ways to link the concepts and skills of the individual worksheets with the children's prior knowledge and to extend the learning with creative activities. She invited children to work cooperatively in pairs and later in groups of four for certain lessons, incorporating constructivist principles into traditional approaches.

Initially hesitant and self-conscious, Betty's confidence soared with the success of her phonics lessons and with the praise and support from Darlene. As Betty utilized manipulatives and continued to build on children's prior knowledge, she had more success with teaching. This further built her confidence and she began to express herself more naturally. As the semester progressed, she gained more and more confidence in her ability to dramatize, sing, dance and incorporate games into her instruction. Classroom management problems decreased as children became more cooperative, attentive and engaged. Betty wrote in her journal on February 21,

My phonics lesson was fun. I taught the consonant blend "th" and had students make a thumbprint and then make an animal out of their prints. Then they wrote words with the "th" blend in it or a sentence using those words. Wish I would have had them guess the word "thumb" on their wall chart before the thumbprint activity.

Finally on March 14, Betty wrote,

Phonics was with a workbook page Darlene wanted me to use. I tried to make it interesting but hard to do. I asked for lots of help so they remained engaged.

Collaborative Project

Both Betty and Helen grasped the social nature of learning and were thus committed to having children work cooperatively on projects. Helen wrote in her journal on October 10,

I feel that it is important that children are able to work with other children, share their reasoning, and help each other problem solve. I think that children should always be able to ask others for help when they have a question.

Given their commitment to collaboration, it was not surprising that Betty and Helen decided to work together on their required action research project and to include the

children in their collaboration. The action research project is a College of Education requirement for obtaining a master's degree. It is undertaken during the spring semester and culminates with a formal defense before a faculty committee.

Part of the school's improvement plan focused on improving writing achievement. Both Toni and Darlene had worked with Helen and Betty in planning for writing instruction that would satisfy writing goals and individual student portfolio requirements. These included narrative writing for both first graders and fourth graders. In discussing writing instruction with the student teachers, the mentor teachers expressed frustration with the lack of ability, background, and previous instructions for these two groups of children. According to both Darlene and Toni, the children seemed to make little progress on writing tasks and appeared unmotivated to complete assignments.

Helen and Betty's collaborative action research project had fourth grade students acting as tutors for first and second grade students in creating a piece of narrative writing. Students met with each other for a half-hour one or two days a week for a period of 14 weeks. Each session focused on a particular step of the narrative writing process; brainstorming, creating a graphic organizer, drafting, revision, editing, publishing, and sharing. Prior to joint sessions, fourth grade students received a mini-lesson on the day's writing focus for their tutees as well as their own stories. Through analysis of surveys, their own and students' reflective journals, writing artifacts, and teacher interviews, Betty and Helen concluded that the project did enhance the academic skills and motivation for writing for both groups. From Helen's journal: "I noticed today that my kids were all working away on their stories. No one asked the page limit." Off-task behavior was minimal and children were frequently "utterly engaged" in their writing together. A severely disabled fourth grader who had been unable to produce a coherent piece of writing all year, later composed a book about her cat. Both Toni and Darlene made accommodations in their class schedules so that the second graders and the fourth graders could work together and offered frequent verbal support for the project to Betty and Helen. Toni indicated to Helen that she "might" use this technique in the future.

Summary of Findings

- ◆ When student teachers were placed in classrooms in which there was great disparity in the philosophy and methods advocated by the teacher preparation program and the mentor teacher, threatening and stressful situations arose.
- ◆ When the mentor teacher was supportive and willing to allow the student teacher to develop her own teaching style and repertoire of techniques, as Toni and Darlene were, students, mentor teacher, and student teacher are all likely to benefit.

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- ◆ With guidance, student teachers accepted responsibility for children's learning rather than resorting to blaming their poverty status for their failure.
- ◆ Given a collaborative style of supervision, student teachers found ways to implement instructional strategies learned in their literacy coursework and continued to embrace constructivism within a transmission-oriented curriculum.
- ◆ Within this complex student teaching environment, student teachers successfully completed student teaching amid lavish praise from their mentor teachers and the principal, the student teaching supervisor, and university faculty who heard the successful defense of their collaborative action research project. The district hired both Betty and Helen as full time teachers for the following year.

Discussion

Student teacher placements in schools where prevailing beliefs and instructional strategies differ substantially from the teacher preparation coursework are common. On the one hand, student teachers may be ill prepared to implement the expected curriculum and teaching methods of the school; while on the other, the university supervisor and methods instructors have expectations for student teaching experiences they may be unable to meet. Since the university supervisor and the mentor teacher are powerful gate keepers, this further complicates the situation for the student teacher.

Some universities, mindful of the difficulties of this situation, choose to ignore it and continue to hope for better matches between placements and teacher preparation programs in the future. Others grapple with the realities of philosophical mismatches.

In our experience, the bind can be alleviated when methods instructors are aware of the contexts in which student teachers operate. Acquainting preservice teachers with state mandated standards, benchmarks, testing procedures, and the reform lexicon is helpful as is the inclusion of "test taking literacy." Student teachers want us to address directly how constructivist principles of literacy instruction can be incorporated into a transmission-oriented curriculum by providing ideas and strategies for blending the two worlds. For example, skills often taught by direct instruction can be taught in the context of self-selected reading and read alouds through modeling and demonstration by the teacher.

The university supervisor can further assist student teachers to connect theory to practice by having them reflect on the gray areas — i.e., how to build a lesson around a mandated, skills-based worksheet or textbook excerpt. The required material becomes one tool to achieve broader learning goals that are couched within constructivist principles. The student teaching supervisor is in a unique position to

mediate the differences in teaching philosophies and techniques with the student teacher by finding such “soft spots or gray areas.” Rather than sending our students out into the school and simply hoping for the best, (with the expectation that many of them will simply “hit the wall” shortly, if not immediately), we have found that if we discuss the clashes openly in class, equip students with constructivist principles, require inquiry through action research, and supervise the student teaching process to encourage a theory to practice connection, we can improve their chances of success.

The role of the mentor teacher is also significant, here. Mentor teachers, by and large, want the student teacher to fit into their routines and perspectives (Koerner, 1992). For many student teachers, this is a difficult task. Ideally, the mentor teacher provides a low degree of direction for the student teacher while offering a high level of support (Ferguson & Peck, 1996) as Toni and Darlene did. Low direction allows the student teacher to try out ideas and experiment with methods and techniques that make sense to her. Mentor teachers create a high level of support when they encourage, praise, and provide positive feedback to the student teacher for experimentation and risk-taking. Unfortunately, this ideal of a high support, low direction student teaching environment, is rare.

We are encouraged to continue to supervise, and thus, mediate such engagement. We saw student teachers take a critical, yet sympathetic, view toward what they saw and did themselves. They recognized the disparities and found ways to treat children differently. We saw them taking the required textbooks and workbooks and utilizing them in creative ways. In fact, they were successfully negotiating the “swamp land” between theory learned at the university and practices required in some public schools by making up their own minds about who the children were, what influences they had to contend with, and what strategies worked best in their individual settings. By offering alternative perspectives such as Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1994) of who children are and under what circumstances they are required to develop, student teachers seemed more likely to consider alternatives to transmission methods. We find that we are inspired to recommit to a philosophy of constructivism in preparing student teachers for the realities of teaching in the 21st Century.

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