

Purposeful Partnerships

Linking Preservice Teachers with Diverse K-12 Students

Lauren McClanahan & Marsha Riddle Buly

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges of any K-12 teacher education program is providing pre-service teachers opportunities to work with students who are culturally and linguistically different from themselves. Despite best efforts of selecting texts and facilitating discussions, new teachers recently interviewed report that coursework just didn't help them to prepare for the diversity in their classrooms. The new teachers call for changes in their training and help in finding ways to work with diverse students (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2008).

Preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms is compounded when there is locally a lack of racial and economic diversity among all of the students, both pre-service teachers and K-12 students, a situation we face in our northwest region of Washington State. However, this is not an impossible situation to surmount. With creative and purposeful partnerships, future teachers can receive more than a textbook introduction to diversity.

In this article, we describe the practices of two departments within the same college of education, one focused on preparing elementary teachers (K-8), and one focused on secondary teachers (5-12). We share two ways our departments, and in particular our literacy courses, have purposely partnered with schools whose demographics differ significantly from that of our students.

The Woodring College of Education, part of Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, is comprised of approximately 1,900 students. The Secondary Education Department offers undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and

Master's in Teaching degrees as well as initial licensure. The Elementary Education Department is primarily an undergraduate certification program, with students selecting a major academic focus. The majority (75%) of students are White, in their early to mid-twenties, and from the greater Puget Sound area.

Secondary Education

The Interconnected Roles of Place and Literacy

How often do we, upon meeting someone for the first time, ask of them, "Where are you from?" Such a question was the starting point for a year-long practicum offered to Secondary Education students. Knowing one's students is vital for effective teaching. One way to get to know one's students is through getting to know the communities from which they come (Banks et al., 2005; Robbins, 2005; Sobel, 2005; Theobald & Siskar, 2008). This can be especially valuable when the communities of K-12 students differ drastically from the communities of pre-service teacher candidates. Since places make up, in part, who we are (Gruenewald, 2003), having conversations about those places is a good first step in getting to know one another.

A total of 10 secondary teacher education students were involved in this particular practicum, ranging in endorsement areas including English, biology, social studies, and mathematics. The students volunteered to participate in this practicum, and agreed to stay involved for the entire academic year.

The practicum was not affiliated with any particular class, although, since Lauren teaches secondary content literacy courses and had each student in class, literacy was the main focus of the long-distance partnership with secondary students in the isolated fishing village of Eek, Alaska. Eek was chosen primarily because of its location, and because the residents of

Eek are on the front lines when it comes to feeling the effects of global climate change, a topic that was discussed in depth during the project.

The word "Eek" is Yup'ik Eskimo for "a small cliff," upriver from the village. The village of Eek sits upon the banks of the Eek River, which is a tributary of the Lower Kuskokwim River, and is within several miles of the Bering Sea. Home to approximately 300 people, subsistence fishing and hunting comprise the majority of the local economy.

The Eek school houses 88 K-12 students. Grades K-2 are taught in the native Yup'ik language, with English taking over as the primary language in the third grade. The eight students who worked with us in this practicum were all female, aged 9-13, and all members of the "Future Teachers of Alaska" club.

While Washington State is home to nearly 60 Native American tribes, Eek, and its fragile ecosystem, is unique in terms of feeling the effects of global warming. Since infusing sustainability education into the work of our pre-service teaching is a goal for the college, Eek was the perfect location to conduct our exchange. Throughout the practicum, pre-service teacher candidates were paired with middle school students in Eek. Through the use of e-mail and various writing assignments, both sets of students (from the university and the village school) got to know one another's places, and one another as well.

Writing can be a crucial tool for learning about communities and one another (Robbins, 2005). According to Mary Pipher (2006), "All writing is designed to change the world, or in some small way perhaps a change in a reader's mood or in his appreciation of a certain kind of beauty" (p. 21). Exploring perceptions and learning to appreciate difference was exactly what the types of writing done during this practicum tried to accomplish. The writing composed at each school site was not necessarily

Lauren McClanahan and Marsha Riddle Buly are associate professors in the College of Education at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington.

Promising Practices

polished, not necessarily ready to be made “public,” but was more in the category of “writing-to-learn,” writing to find out how students felt about a certain topic, in this case, the topic of global climate change.

Evidence of a Changing Climate: Developing Writing Prompts

In Eek, the tundra upon which the villagers rely for food and game is literally melting. The permafrost that lies just below the surface of the tundra is showing signs of thawing—for the first time in nearly 120 thousand years (since the beginning of the last glacial cycle). As this happens, patterns of flora and fauna are shifting, and along with it, the livelihoods (and cultures) of people who have inhabited the area for nearly as long. And, as if that weren’t enough, the nearby Bering Sea is also getting warmer, affecting the growth of plankton, which feed nearly half of the seafood caught in the United States each year. This has given Lauren’s teacher education students plenty to discuss with their Alaskan partners.

In order to explore the topic of climate change further, the secondary teacher education students had the opportunity to develop effective writing prompts to illicit discussion about topics that included the shifting environment in this most fragile of ecosystems. While this may sound like a simple endeavor, anyone who has ever crafted a writing prompt knows that it can be anything but. Middle level students, like computers, will complete an assignment literally as they are asked to. Being explicit in what you ask is key, as Lauren’s students learned. After creating several drafts, final copies were decided upon, and sent by the teacher preparation students to their partners in Alaska. An example of a draft follows:

Please describe what climate change means to you personally. Has climate change affected your daily routine in the past years? If so, how? In what way is climate change most apparent to you in your everyday life?

Note how the prompt is explicit, multi-layered, and does not allow for a “yes” or “no” response. However, just because a prompt is carefully designed does not mean that the response will be. A well-designed prompt increases the likelihood of a rich response, but there is still room for misinterpretation or a lack of detail.

In response to the above prompt, the university student received this piece of writing from a student in Eek:

Climate change personally means the climate changing on Earth. Yes, climate change has affected my daily routine. I hang out and I notice the snow melts and then it gets really cold. The weather just changes all of a sudden and barely hang out. The major difference from the climate when I was a child and now is when I was a child, the ponds, lakes, rivers, etc use to freeze up early. The climate now just gets really warm and the snow starts to melt; the ponds, lakes, and rivers start to freeze up late, it gets really cold and long days after the weather just gets warm. I’m not sure if climate change affects my town.

In this case, it appears that the Alaskan student is confusing the terms “climate” and “weather.” Perhaps this should have been addressed in the original prompt. In any event, portions of the prompt were answered, while other parts are not as clear. This was a typical pattern of response throughout the practicum, not only for this particular exchange.

Perhaps language, too, played a role, as English is not the first language of many of the Alaskan students, although it is spoken in their homes. Issues such as these were important for Lauren’s students to wrestle with, as they impacted future drafts of writing prompts.

The Benefits of Conducting Practica in Diverse Contexts

By having these conversations, Lauren’s students have become aware of several things. First, they have become aware that climate change is not just something they read about on-line or hear about

on the radio. Climate change is real, and it has real effects on real people—people they have gotten to know over the course of an academic year. For the university students, climate change is something about which they are aware, but the changes are not yet immediately apparent.

For the students of Eek, the changes are happening right now. Not only are the changes happening, but they are affecting the way these students live their lives, and have lived their lives for generations. This practicum could not have taken place here in Bellingham, but because of this collaboration, the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to connect one-on-one with students who had much to teach them.

Second, the secondary students have learned about technology and how to use basic technology (primarily e-mail) to broaden the scope of their classrooms. The implications of projects like this are varied. Lauren’s students are now open to the possibilities of broadening the scope of their classrooms, open to inviting voices that might not otherwise be heard—voices very different from their own.

Finally, Lauren’s students now have a specific strategy for using place-based writing to develop literacy skills across the curriculum. Since Lauren’s students come from a variety of content areas, it is important for them to understand that writing must be a part of each of them. The topic need not be climate change, although that is certainly a topic that can be discussed in every discipline. As one pre-service teacher stated, “I did not anticipate being moved so

Figure 1
Aerial View of Eek, Alaska



deeply by this experience, and its implications for me as a future teacher.”

It should be noted that the pre-service teachers were not the only ones who benefited from this exchange. The students of Eek not only got to get to know a college student on a one-on-one basis, but received an opportunity to voice their opinions on a topic that is affecting them directly. They were able to put a name and a face to the concept of climate change, and, through writing, share that with the next generation of teachers.

According to an Eek student:

What I liked about having a correspondent was that I had a good peer editor. Not like he was my peer, but he gave me really good feedback on some of my writing pieces. Also I liked reading his fun stories of things he wrote. Through him I am learning about going to college. Besides this I liked to have a pen pal so I can get my head out of schoolwork and talk to him.

Elementary Education

Partnering with a High-Needs K-8 School

There is perhaps a tendency for colleges of education to partner with the closest schools to campus. That's certainly the easiest in terms of travel, especially in this era of increasing gas prices. In our community, likely similar to many university towns, the schools with populations most unlike the students on the campus are not those next to the university.

Marsha purposely sought out high-needs schools with diverse populations to partner with for her K-8 literacy courses. In doing so she found she didn't have to look far. Just 20 miles to the south of the university, and fairly close to a cross-county bus line, Marsha found a burgeoning K-8 school. The school was notorious for low-test scores on state required assessments, high poverty (based on the percentage of free and reduced lunch), and high numbers of English language learners (ELLs). The demographics in this school were quite dissimilar to those of the K-8 preservice teachers, yet similar to many of the schools across the state and nation where the future teachers were likely to find employment.

Marsha worked with the administrator and school staff to find a location to teach her classes, believing that to be in the school would be an advantage over being at the university. Over the years she has been able to find a variety of spaces in any school she has worked with—sharing rooms with music teachers on their off

days, libraries when there weren't classes scheduled, special education classrooms when the teacher was working on a push-in model, classrooms at the end of the day or during “specials” (P.E., music, etc).

One year she used a library and another year the gym floor—anywhere that she could bring in a projector (which she purchased). The heart of Marsha's literacy courses is a built-in practicum piece, when K-8 teacher education students directly apply what they are learning about literacy and the link between language, culture, and literacy.

Recognizing how critical each instructional moment in a day is, and also how powerful small group instruction can be, Marsha works with a classroom teacher (or two) to design a unit of study that fits with the curriculum the K-8 class will be studying. For example, one year she

worked with second grade teachers on a biography unit, another year there was a poetry unit with the third and then fifth grades, and this year she worked with an eighth grade classroom to develop a unit on cover letters.

The key to making this a successful partnership for the teachers and the school is that the work of Marsha's teacher education students fits with the K-8 classroom where they are collaborating. The course moves to a different classroom each quarter in order to give lots of students in the schools opportunities to work with teacher education students.

Marsha is now working with her third school and the same phenomena has happened with each school—the first quarter she has to “sell” the program to a teacher, but by the end of the year she has more teachers wanting her to work with their

Figure 2

MY LIFE AS A FLOWER

When I was a seed

When Diana watered me I was scared. I thought I was going to DROWN! She poured me ¼ of a cup of water. It smelled like chilly caliente [hot].

My first sprout.

My first sprout was little and green. I thought I was big and strong. But I realized that I haven't grown a lot. I was 1/4 big. I looked down and saw the ground covered with red dots. I thought my friends were dead and covered with blood, but then I realized that I can't bleed. I made a fool out of myself. I bent over laughing and got stuck. I tried to get up but my spine broke. Pain shot through all my 13 leaves.

My first leaf

I woke up and saw a leaf growing out of my stem. I screamed and found my friend laughing and chatting. My friend was big and it was bigger than me and she had more leaves than me. She could always brag about how she was pretty and going to grow bigger than everyone else. Then I showed my best friend, Sticky Icky, the leaf I had. She said, “WOW!” How did you get that leaf? I said, I don't know. I woke up this morning and found it on my back. Cool. And then more leaves started growing. More and more people will know notice me. That is my life!

Promising Practices

students than she can work with! It's a win-win situation.

Focusing on Watersheds

During one recent quarter Marsha was able to work with 20 teacher education students and fourth grade students. The time of the class coincided with science, so the focus of the literacy work with students was research and presentation, focusing on watersheds—the science topic of the class.

The classroom teacher believed in an

inquiry approach to science, so the fourth grade students received an introduction and listed questions they were interested in exploring. Marsha's students were then paired with groups of fourth grade students. Each group of fourth grade students selected an inquiry question. The first responsibility, after getting to know each other, was to help the fourth grade students consider possible genres of presentation.

Once a genre had been chosen, the teacher education students had the task of putting together and teaching a unit of

study around the mode of presentation. There were lab reports, plays, songs, letters, and brochures. The students worked together once a week for the next five weeks, using one hour of the four-hour university course time to research, learn about a form, create a piece to share, and finally to present to other students, teachers, and to the superintendent of the school district.

Diana, an ELL, participated in an experiment where different flower seeds were watered with different mixtures. To share her experience she drafted and

Figure 3
Three-Step Process

Step 1. Researching

Name: Grace

Research Organizer

- What is the name of your organism? Bull Frog
(*Rana catesbeiana*)
- Where does it live (habitat)? vegetation along the edges of large, slow moving bodies of water, ponds, streams.
- What does it eat? anything that it is big enough to catch. large insects, snails, worms, small fish, birds, small mammals.
- What eats your organism? nothing. They are literally poisonous.
- Write three interesting things you learned about your organism.
 - If bullfrogs are introduced to a habitat they overpopulate, this causes a lot of damage.
 - Females lay up to 25,000 eggs.
 - The adult frog can live up to 13 years.

feel webbed feet swimming
frog eat fish
the children
leave bullfrogs a natural habitat
bullfrogs know bullfrogs
interesting things
extensive

Step 2. Drafting

about Salmon

where salmon live

what salmon eat

what eats the salmon

interesting facts of salmon

American Bullfrog

Where do Bullfrogs live?

Bullfrogs live in ponds and slow moving places like streams.

Let's look at a Bullfrog's Menu

Bullfrog's Menu

Larvae Insects Snails

Oh My!

Did You Know?

Picture Here

Girl bullfrogs can lay 25,000 eggs in some places, people eat frog legs.

An adult bullfrog can live up to 13 years

Picture Here

about Pond Turtles

where turtles live

Pond turtles live on land and water and everywhere but Antarctica


did you know people eat turtles

Picture

Some interesting facts

- Turtles can weigh nearly to 200 pounds
- turtles eat larvae, snails and fish
- pond turtles rarely live in Ponds

Step 3. Publishing



About Beavers

Where do they live?

- Rivers
- Streams

What do they eat?

- Water grass
- Wood
- Bark
- Leaves

Some interesting facts:

- They are found in North America
- They belong to a big family of mammals
- They were hunted for their fur by fur trappers.

For more information please stop by Mrs. Rosen's class to learn more about these animals.

Salmon Expert—Rene



Bullfrog Expert—Grace



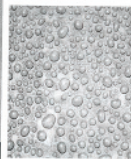
Turtle Expert—Zaneta



Beaver Expert—Albert



Live'n' Life In Da Water



By:
Grace
Rene
Albert
Zaneta

A brochure about Turtles, Beavers, Frogs, and Salmon

About Salmon

Where do Salmon live?

- Ocean
- Streams



What do Salmon Eat?

- Little fish
- Crustaceans
- Insects

Interesting Facts About Salmon:

- 7 kinds of Salmon
- Salmon live in both fresh and salt water
- After Salmon hatch they are two centimeters long
- Trout are part of the Salmon family



American Bullfrog

Where Do Bullfrogs Live?

Bullfrogs live in ponds around places like Ponds and streams.

Let's look at a bullfrog's Menu

Larvae Fish
Insects Snails

Worms

Did You Know?

- Girl bullfrogs can lay 25,000 eggs.
- In some places eat frog legs.
- An adult bullfrog can live up to 13 years.



About Pond Turtles

Where turtles live

Pond turtles live on land and water. Everywhere but Antarctica.

Did you know people eat turtles?



Some interesting facts:

- Turtles can weigh nearly to 200 pounds
- Turtles eat larvae, snails, and fish
- Pond turtles rarely live in ponds.

Figure 4
Presenting Informational Text
on Conserving Water



then published with the guidance of her university teacher education mentors a piece entitled “My Life as a Flower” (see Figure 2).

Another group decided to research life in the water. They wanted to present their information using a brochure format. Figure 3 depicts the three-step process the group undertook to publish their final brochure.

Another group focused on ways to conserve water. They decided to share their findings in a picture book format that would be useful to younger and older students. Figure 4 shows one of the students presenting the group’s picture book.

Conclusion

The partnerships between our College of Education and diverse schools—whether regional or by internet—provide rich opportunities for our students to practice what they learn in their teacher preparation courses. We are sure, based on the feedback from our students, that these experiences make a difference.

In fact, in the K-8 school, the now fifth grade students consistently refer back to the watershed project they engaged in last year! As we have shown, it is possible, and not that difficult, to engage pre-service teachers with rich educational experiences that go beyond the textbook by thinking outside the traditional university teacher preparation classroom.

References

- Banks, J. et al. (2005). Teaching diverse learners. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 232-274). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gruenewald, D. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3-12.
- Pipher, M. (2006). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Penguin.
- Robbins, S. (2005). “Writing suburbia” in pictures and print. In D. Winter & S. Robbins

(Eds.), *Writing our communities: Local learning and public culture* (pp. 88-92). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

- Rochkind, J., Ott, A., Immerwahr, J., Doble J., & Johnson J. (2008). Lessons learned: New teachers talk about their jobs, challenges, and long-range plans. *Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality*, 3. Retrieved June 27, 2008, from http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=119
- Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms and communities*. Great Barrington, ME: The Orion Society.
- Theobald, P., & Siskar, J. (2008). Place: Where diversity and community can converge. In D. Gruenewald & G. Smith (Eds.), *Place based education in the global age* (pp. 197-219). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.