

Collective case study of an integrated campus/field-based teacher education course: A three-year action research project

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Introduction

This presentation reports the findings from a three-year study of an introductory professional field-based teacher education course. A significant characteristic of the course was that the majority of classes for this course were located in classrooms within school sites.

Purposes

The purposes of this study were:

- (1) To develop a collective case study of a three-year action research investigation into the instruction and organization of a field-based teacher education course.
- (2) To understand how to make effective use of opportunities created by relocating a substantial portion of a teacher education course within a school.

The idea of teaching university courses in a school has been advocated by leading education scholars in North America (Grimmett, 1998; Zeichner, 1992). In line with Zeichner's (1992) arguments, the course was designed with an inquiry-oriented field experience that focused on the development of reflective teaching practice with fundamentally altered power and role relationships between course instructor, school teachers and student teachers.

In teacher education there are few reported studies that examine the effect on "learning to teach" through a teacher preparation course conducted within a school (Cooper, 1996; Duquette, 1997; Samaras & Shelly, 1998). Most research on student teachers' learning focuses upon the field experience as a separate entity from the university based course work (Kagan, 1992; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). This separation is supported by the traditional sense of a knowledge-for-practice mindset implying that formal knowledge is taught at the university and practical knowledge is learned in a school as theory is transformed into practice Cochran-Smith (1999). Attempts to change such traditional stances, as Russell (2001) and Wideen & Lemma (199) have reported, have had limited success with the how pedagogy of teacher education is trapped in a default teaching style of "teaching as telling" (Finkel, 2000).

Context

This field-based course contained the initial field experience that was required of student teachers in their teacher preparation program. Prior to this study the course had become pass/fail. Student teachers had to pass in order to advance in their teacher preparation program. The course was conducted in the spring term over a three-week period and involved approximately 45 student teachers in each year of the study.

Students attended class daily for three hours. Five different schools from different age groups and socio-economic areas were involved in the course.

Theoretical framework

As shown in Figure 1, the importance of teaching a university methods class within a school context, in the rich milieu of a functioning classroom and using what student teachers already know, is based on the concepts of situated learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and personal experience (Dewey, 1963). These concepts suggest that experience needs to be personal, purposeful, and that experience and understanding are in constant interaction. A key concern of the course was for student teachers to learn the role of a teacher by participating in a school situation in short regular visits, followed by mediation in a whole class and small group activities, integrated with personal reflection.



Figure 1: University classes situated in a school and student teachers teaching what they know

As advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991) the course follows situated theories of learning where, rather than focus on the acquisition of knowledge, learning in the course focused on learning how to participate or become a member of a particular community of practice. As shown in Fig 2, this was done incrementally in classes at the university, then in a school and then with students. A major focus of learning in the course was creating the foundation for learning to talk and act like a member of a teacher community, taking on the language, identities, and practices of the community.

The study adopted a practical action research process advocated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982). The researcher acted as a critical friend to the instructor of the course. The focus of the research was not necessarily the improvement of the instructor's teaching practice, but rather the improvement of the influence of the course. Action in this study was focused upon the activity of the student teachers and their resulting learning.

After each year of the course a case study was written. These collective case studies are reported chronologically and collectively in this presentation. As Stake (1994) and Merriam (1991) comment, a collective case study leads to a better understanding and theorizing of a particular phenomenon – in this instance, a field-based teacher education course.



Figure 2: University classes taught on campus and in a school, with course material informed by experiences with children in a teacher role.

Data sources and analysis

During the course one researcher acted as a participant observer. Field notes were kept, noting events from the course and discussions between student teachers, course instructor and teachers in the schools. Data was recorded in numerous matrices, and charts as a precursor to data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and in the final year of the study data was transferred into NUD*IST Nvivo software program. The software program allowed three years of data to be integrated and offered evidence of recurring patterns of experience and insight from the participants in the course. The other researcher taught the course and drew on the data analysis to continually develop the course.

As part of the course, student teachers reflected upon course material and their experiences from the school in a reflective journal. Student teachers also participated in an electronic mail listserv assignment. This assignment provided data on the student teachers' insights on teaching and their informal comments and observations.

Using a process of constant comparison, each of the data sources were coded and analyzed in the following manner:

1. Participant observer's notes were coded into nodes (categories) in the Nvivo software. Through constant comparisons these nodes were developed and connections were made between nodes using trees maps and models. As data was constantly coded and contrasted, in-depth categories emerged that were used to describe the culture of the

course (see Fig 3 for example). These categories were used to frame questions asked of the student teachers using the e-mail medium.

2. The researcher and instructor read each journal entry and responded with comments to students. The comments were written on the basis of encouraging deeper thought, connections and discussion. Often examples were encouraged or reference to questions like, “What *is* teaching?” and “What would *you* do?” After the journals were read key ideas and quotes from each journal entry was entered into NVivo.
3. Listserv entries were collected from the e-mail software in files for each participant. These documents were then imported into Nvivo. The imported data was then read and analyzed with coding made to the existing node system.

The authors validated coding by seeking agreement on definitions, with checks made with twelve volunteer student teachers, and three teachers and one principal involved in the project over the three years. All were interviewed with questions based on the findings from 1 to 3 above. Interviews were transcribed and imported into Nvivo, then integrated into the node system. Following the guidance of Bazeley and Richards (2000) data was entered, coded in nodes (categories) and mapped, searched, modeled,

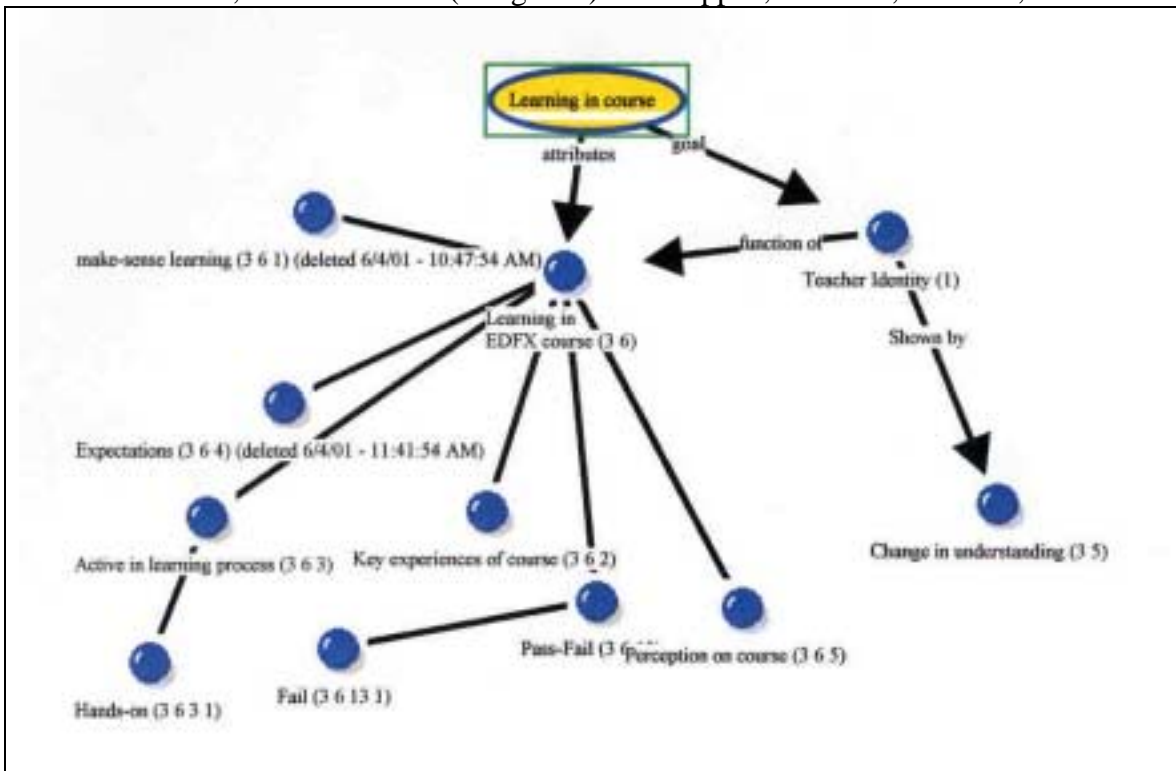


Figure 3: An example of a node structure from the Nvivo software

synthesized and analyzed. Summary of selective findings that represented the core patterns over the three-years of the study, and the emerging patterns associated to changes in the course are reported.

Summary results of collective case studies

The following insights were gained from the case studies of the EDFX200 course.

Year 1: Plans were: (1) to investigate how conducting a teacher preparation course in a school influenced student teachers' perceptions and understanding of teaching; and (2) to examine the application of Vygotskian tenets for learning in a teacher preparation course.

Social interaction was used to develop student learning in group assignments, listserv discussion and class discussions. The school culture was used as a way of stimulating inquiry into the practice of a teacher. Participant observation, journals and e-mails were used as a source of data.

The social nature of the course with the stimulus of the school environment encouraged student teachers to question long held assumptions and fears about teaching. The Vygotskian framework gave theoretical support to an alternative form of teacher education. This alternative asked student teachers to learn from the experience of schools, learn from each other and develop an understanding of teaching that moved them away from simplistic and idealistic notions of how to be a teacher. The reality of managing a class of children produced a fear in many student teachers that needed to be addressed more explicitly, and more continuously.

Year 2: The study continued to focus on investigating how conducting a teacher preparation course within schools influenced student teachers' perceptions and understanding of teaching. Additional insights were needed from interviews with student teachers and teachers. Plans were made to have greater emphasis on classroom management earlier in the course with more explicit recognition of learning from the school.

The Year 2 analysis resulted in three major categories that characterized the participant observer's experience of the course, and the perceptions reported by the student teachers and the mentor teachers of their experience of the course. These were: (1) "contextual cognizant effect", those events that stimulated thinking about teaching; (2) "situated-mediated learning", in-class opportunities to reflect further on those events; and (3) "teacher becoming", outside of class opportunities to make connections between events/reflections and on personal past experiences and perceptions. These three themes operated in a recursive relationship as shown in Fig 4. The regular, practical daily experience in a school accompanied by a lesson in the course, and then reflected upon in a journal and on the class listserv, resulted in an expanding spiraling effect as the student teachers develop a foundational understanding of teaching.

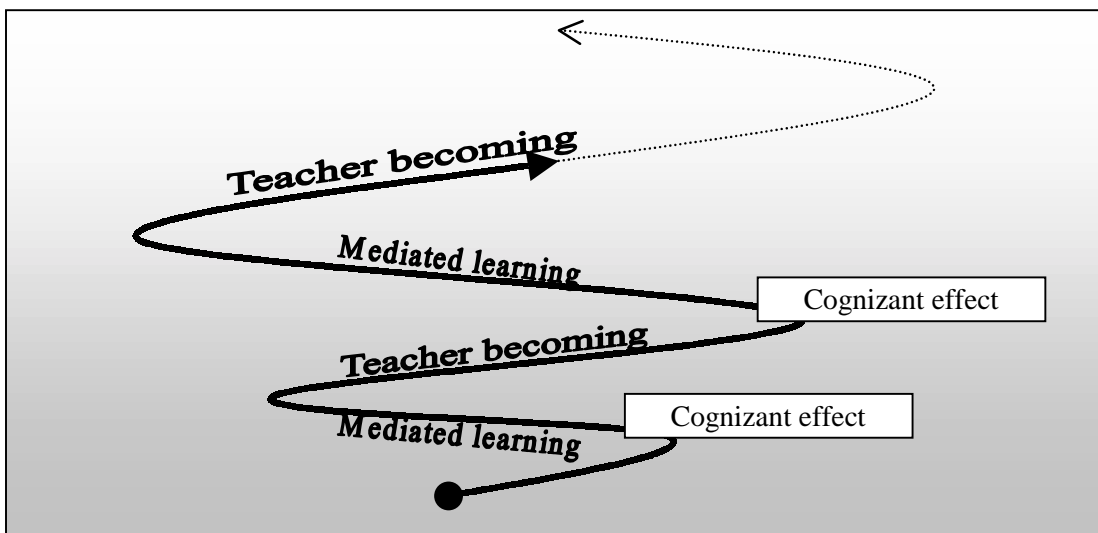


Figure 4: Recursive inter-relationship of the major research themes.

(1) Contextual Cognizant Effect

A key characteristic of this theme was that learning how to teach became an interactive construction of meaning, where the focus became making complex

connections rather than looking for the 'right' answer. The contextual cognizant effects introduced in the course played a critical role in enabling the student teachers to link their previously constructed ideas about teaching with their emotional responses to teaching. The student teachers took part in events and activities such as role-playing of classroom management scenarios, observation visits to classrooms, peer teaching and four-day field experiences in two schools. For example, the role-playing experience, requiring each of the student teachers to respond in a teacher's role, enabled them to make connections between their largely unarticulated fears of confrontational encounters with students, their images of what "good" classrooms should look like, and their desire for knowledge about "how to teach." These experiences enabled the student teachers to face their fears of inadequacy and confrontation in a supportive and comfortable environment, interacting with colleagues who shared their concerns and needs. Each of these "contextual cognizant effects" included a component of reflection, these opportunities being provided through their daily dialogue journals, e-mail listserv entries, formal and informal class discussion, concept-mapping of their learning, and guiding reflective questions following their observation/investigation activities in classrooms.

As the student teachers participated in each event and reflective experience, they constructed frameworks or scaffolds for themselves upon which they could base future learning and understanding. As their frameworks became recognizable structures, they could then more coherently connect other learning and understandings to these structures, e.g., past personal experiences of education with former teachers, readings, parents, etc. Student teachers found themselves referring to personal stories of their past school experiences, commenting (often in amazement) that they were learning by reflecting on these past experiences. Many examples of these changing structures became apparent as the research data was analyzed. A sample of this data is described below.

A major concern for the student teachers was classroom management, in particular "controlling" the class. Initially entries in journals and on the listserv focused on the fear of controlling a class, but as the visits to schools occurred, the student teachers started sharing what they had seen. For example Andrea wrote on the listserv:

I think the most valuable thing I learned in classroom management was learning how and when to vary the class activities. We have all had teachers (especially since we have all attended university) that spent the whole class lecturing and getting students to take notes and we know how boring this is. In the elementary school I was observing, the teacher was continually switching activities (about every fifteen minutes or so) to accommodate the short attention spans of the students and their inability to sit still for long periods of time.

Similarly Cathy commented,

It may seem overly simple, but one of the best and most effective techniques for classroom management that I found when observing was counting. It gave the students a chance to become quiet...One teacher counted so quietly I could hardly hear him and the students were SO quiet by the time he was finished. Another one is standing beside the student who is off-task. One teacher just put her hand on his shoulder (he was wriggling and talking during her "lecture") and he became very quiet.

Early on in the listserv discussion several student teachers voiced the opinion that disobedient students should be removed from the class, however, as the student teachers visited classrooms a more connected and complex insight to dealing with management developed, as highlighted in one of Caroline's entries.

I would only use kicking students out of the room as a last resort...it's a desperate act that stops the undesirable behavior for only a short period of time. If every teacher

reacts the same way, these kids are going to spend a considerable amount of their school career in the hallways, learning nothing and nurturing defiance. Do we really want that? Plus, getting kicked out of class is only a deterrent for those who are normally well behaved and dislike breaking rules. The more rebellious see it as a perverse honour. For example, one Grade 9 student who got kicked out of class yesterday received high-fives from his friends as he left the class. As with many of you, I believe in setting some firm rules of conduct for students... like Andrea I would identify the ringleaders... I would then make an appointment to speak to each one of the initiators individually to see what was going on with them. Work out what kinds of activities they like best in my class and try to incorporate more of that in return for better behavior.

As Caroline's quote highlights, the student teachers started to develop a sense of relationship in their constructions of management from their observations in the schools, and as with Caroline, started to think through the role of a teacher.

(2) Situated-integrated learning

Opportunities throughout this course for student teachers to integrate theory, research, and practice led to their growth as teachers, as they reported in written and verbal comments. They became more able to question existing practices and offer alternative strategies and perspectives, and to recognize the value of collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. Opportunities to compare elementary and secondary school contexts provided places to examine assumptions about what must be and what could be in different contexts, and to discover commonalities in all teaching experiences. Situating their experiences at school sites enabled them to challenge their assumptions, and to check their perceptions with teachers living in the particular context. Team-teaching experiences enabled the student teachers to share knowledge and perspectives with one another, recognizing the strengths that come from multiple perspectives. Through the reflective elements of the course, which offered them time and space to make sense of these new understandings, the student teachers began to recognize complexities associated with teaching. Their reflective writing and thinking enabled them to develop a vocabulary that encouraged "teacher" thinking rather than "student" thinking, that enabled them to articulate questions and offer alternatives; they began to learn how to question previously held assumptions and beliefs.

The individual and personal nature of the assignments and activities in the course (due in large part to the pass/fail evaluation) enabled the student teachers to develop based on their own previous experiences and understandings. As one student teacher said, "You further your own understanding of yourself and what you are going to end up like," which they came to recognize and articulate in their reflective writings and discussions. They were able to make connections in their learning, as one student teacher commented, "I see a lot more how the pieces (classroom management, and evaluation, etc.) play together and that the whole course brought that in with all the types of assignments that we are doing with everything we did ... it just jump-started my brain into thinking. It was really exciting." Another student teacher said about the course, "This is linking ideas and you remember it." A third student teacher reported, "I have never before had a class where I felt that I would keep what I had learned ... even when I was just lying in bed and thinking, I was learning more even though the class was over."

(3) Teacher Becoming

This theme represented the student teachers' recognition of different positions they occupied in the school context, moving from a student's position towards a sense of the teacher's position and the multiple roles that the teacher position implied. The ability of

the student teachers to recognize themselves “becoming” teachers was dependent on many complex factors, but some were able to recognize and name the sites of their own and their colleagues’ resistance to complexity and difference. Their desire for simplicity, for being given the answer-key to unlocking the mysteries of teaching, became replaced in some instances by the ability to manage increasing complexities. As they become more comfortable in school contexts, seeing themselves through the eyes of the students who recognized them as teachers, they become less fearful of facing some of the contradictions they saw and experienced. They became aware of their past selves as students and their future selves as teachers and began to forge links between the two. They became more confident in their ability to become teachers, to recognize who they were as teachers. As Emily described about becoming a teacher,

...it is not just something that you can regurgitate on an exam that you read in a text book, it's a change in your whole concept of yourself and of teaching, just self awareness and it really just changes who you are...It was neat like to make a list of your strengths...kind of cocky, but it is important to realize that you have strengths and what they are and to take them and develop them...I needed to add two more strengths to my list...my roommate's boyfriend was there and he said, “you are serene...like you have a calming effect on people.” And I don't know, I never really thought of that in myself. But then at the end of the course Harriet said the exact same word to me. She described me as being serene and I was like whooo, first of all I have never heard that word to describe a person, I took it as a major compliment.

The student teachers became more confident in their ability to become teachers who would be more willing to take risks, to perceive a different type of education. As Harriet commented at her interview after the course,

when I first heard about the course I was like, doing this and this and I had all this other stuff to do and I thought “I better get a good mark,” then I found out it was pass/fail, I thought, “What is this all about, I work hard I want a reward,” but then it kind of makes you think about who you are. I went, “Wait a minute, I don't need extrinsic motivation to do this, I am really enjoying this class.” I really learnt a lot. I self-reflected on things that I might not have thought about before, the other side of issues. To me that is the reason why you are here and that is why you should be learning, not for a mark...I never fathomed a world without grading...I then thought, “Yeah this is possible.”

This awareness of themselves as student teachers and their potential capabilities directed their future actions and acted as an impetus to revisit previous teachers and schools, to select appropriate summer jobs, and to re-value their previous experiences.

Building on the social constructivist tenets, the course continued to develop a supportive, comfortable and reflective environment. It became obvious that the school context had a cognizant effect on student teachers causing them to think differently. Some student teachers were quick to make judgments and close down reflection, blaming bad teachers for situations they found uncomfortable. However, many student teachers were able to mediate their own experiences and the shared experiences of their peers creating a growing sense of becoming teachers. The classes of the course created a situated-integrated learning environment where student teachers learned to broaden their view of teaching and provided access to the vast contextual/local knowledge held by teachers. Most teachers saw the course as worthwhile because student teachers experienced the reality of teaching, though some teachers were less welcoming of

outsiders in their classrooms. Concept mapping on classroom management was used to capture the richness of learning from a school. Interviews were added to data collection.

Not all student teachers were profoundly affected by the experiences offered in the course. One student teacher's comment, "I didn't really understand why we were at the school that much," suggested that connections and possibilities were not as readily recognized by her, and the comment "I put in a lot of work and I like to be rewarded with a grade" suggests a stronger connection to "student" thinking than "teacher" thinking. Concerns were focused upon how to get all student teachers: 1) excited about and value learning within the school culture; and 2) to develop an open attitude from a more contextually sensitive perspective.

Year 3: The study focused on emphasizing parts of the course that seemed to have had the major impact upon the student teachers. In particular, to develop student teachers' attitudes to help them be less judgmental, to recognize more their active role in making more open and enabling meaning from their experiences, and make better use of the teachers as experts in the school cultures. Throughout the course, ideas would be related and developed in relation to classroom management.

The instructor emphasized to student teachers the need to have a sense of the 'other' in the class and the active role they had in their own learning. As she said, "This class will reveal a great deal if you know how to look, what to look for, and understand schools at the micro and macros levels." By the end of the course all those interviewed called this "hands-on," life-changing learning.

Teachers and the principal were asked to teach the student teachers by describing their experiences of becoming teachers and how they implemented curriculum. In turn, the course instructor taught the teachers' elementary classes. This partnership relationship evolved a sense of collegiality that situated knowledge of teaching within a culture, and caused all the student teachers to identify more with the teachers they observed.

The talks from teachers helped student teachers begin to let go of the need for certainty as often represented in university textbooks, and learn to apply ideas to the complexity of teaching. In doing this, student teachers initiated teachers' recognition of their professionally developed, situated expertise, where the multiple realities of children are acknowledged in the role of teaching. As Clandinin (1995, p. 30) points out, this encourages a "break from the sacred theory-practice story by relocating...outside the story of expert, knowledge production, certainty, and hierarchy." The process of teacher education will then "give up a familiar and privileged story for the uncertainties of a new one of equality constructed through engaging in collaborative conversations with students, children and teachers."

The following example from the study highlights how situated knowledge became valued within student teachers' growing understanding of teaching. Fig 5 shows one of the participating teachers offering a story to the student teachers about his past and how that has influenced his flexible style of teaching.

As a failing student he admired a grade five teacher who was his inspiration to be a teacher; a teacher who was able to change plans effortlessly to reflect the mood of the students. The researchers had experienced first-hand the difficulty of teaching his particular class of grade five students, and were able to support his claim that flexibility was important. The student teachers heard the teacher describe a particular activity that was happening in his class, and then observe the amazing expressive work that was being completed. The project involved the grade five students learning about poetic imagery, expression, flow, and narrative through

song lyrics, which they interpreted through visuals, words, and spoken language. They then used the internet to research the "facts" of the story/ballad presented in the lyrics. Following that, the students listened to the song and used paint to express visually the emotionality of the song. The project worked wonderfully in the morning, but when the student teachers returned in the afternoon, the students refused to continue. They had had enough of the activity and wanted to pack it up. Disappointed and chagrined, the teacher decided to discontinue the activity and assumed that the student teachers would interpret the interaction as a failure on his part. However, they were able to see the strong classroom management skills he presented and the flexibility he demonstrated in dealing effectively with the situation and described their observations in positive terms to the researcher. The teacher, in a later conversation with the researcher, expressed his disappointment, but was able to come to see his actions as the best solution to the students' needs; he had unconsciously demonstrated how his inspirational grade five teacher lived on in his own practice and through discussion came to recognize his actions as a teaching strength.



Teacher presenting to student teachers

Children's finger paint artwork

Creativity mess made by grade 5 students

Art display of emotionality of the song

Figure 5: Teacher presenting his story of becoming a teacher and his take on curricular with examples of his students' art work based on a song.

Another powerful example came from the principal of the school shown in Figure 6. After he had welcomed the student teachers to his school, touring them around the school, showing how he respected and was respect in return by staff and children, he told his story of starting as a teacher. When he started teaching he said, "I wouldn't hire me. I was horrible...I was always going to power with kids," had a powerful impact. As he

explained, “You don’t own a problem, especially if you do not build it up. In my second year of teaching I went to a PD session and realized I needed to change. I used to think I needed to be harder and punish more, then I realized I was owning the problem by making it worse.” This interaction had a mind opening affect on the student teachers. With his insights the student teachers believed more in what the course instructor had tried to explain and came to see management as an issue of respect with students, an integrated part of the context of the class, not a threat to them.



Principal leading a guided tour of the school Principal telling his story

Figure 6: School principal welcoming and mentoring the student teachers into the profession

Other teachers also told their stories of becoming teachers. The following quotes from student teachers highlights the impact of their talks:

- “I had this great master plan and everything was going to work out perfectly...after [the teacher’s] story I was blown away. He opened my eyes to a whole bunch of ideas and scenarios.”
- “I have never been so interested in what one person has had to say. If I had any doubts about being a teacher before there is definitely no doubts any more. He is the type of teacher I hope to become.”
- “I am grateful to the principal for opening my eyes to these assessment issues, which have been so ingrained in my mind, because I never would have challenged them without his nudge in the right direction.”
- “His discussion was inspirational and gave me several new outlooks on teaching. Every teacher that spoke to us changed the way I look at my goals.”

The student teachers shared their reflections with the teachers creating poster boards where entries from their journals were posted for the teachers to read as shown in Fig 7.

REFLECTIONS: This use of multiple voices from teachers in the position of teacher educator caused a form of professional development. As a school principal commented, “it caused ‘teacherly conversations’ not normally shared amongst teachers.” These conversations were brought to the surface by the eagerness and interest of student teachers. The teachers inspired the student teachers. It was noted that in student teachers’ journals and listserv entries there was far less negative judgments made of teachers. Student teachers learned to see situations as teachers within a culture, rather than outsiders. Discipline problems were still a concern but not a problem, they were a part of the helping students grow, not indicators of success and failure of a teacher.

Evidence from this case study showed changes in student teachers. Whether this change would stay with them as they continued in their university programs needs to be further investigated.

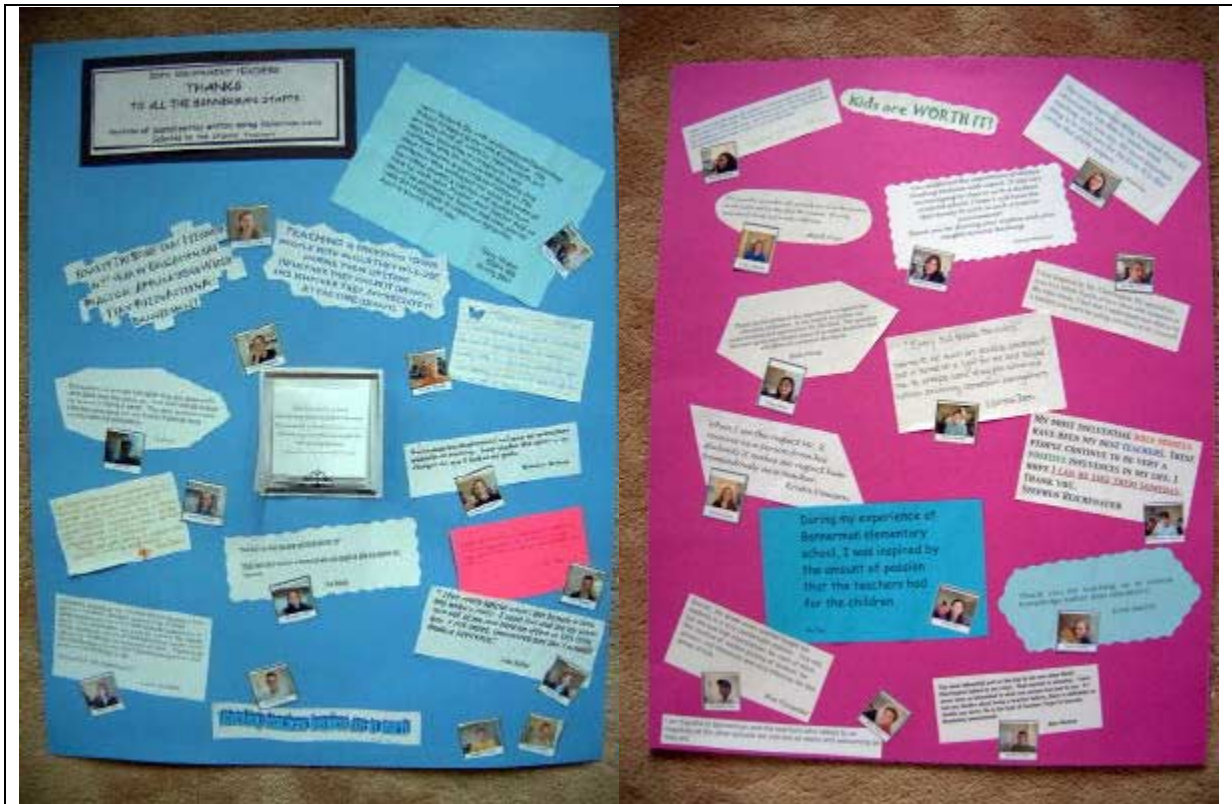


Figure 7: Posters of student teachers reflective quotes in response to visiting the school

Conclusion and summary of findings

The course represents a radical move from traditional, content based learning that student teachers expressed as their general experience in university education. With a rigorous pass/fail standard, the student teachers felt they worked more, learned more and felt more confident of their learning than from other university classes. Some student teachers even said that until this course they had never realized what “real” learning was about. As Zeichner (1992) advocated, the field experience integrated with the course classes created an educative experience which prepared prospective teachers to enter learning communities to understand the full range of teachers' responsibilities and to learn to teach everybody's children, not just children like themselves. The field-based learning, non-graded, social interaction attributes of the course were unique experiences for student teachers. Unfortunately, the value of this type of experience is not recognized by the university system where the grade is seen as the reason for learning and provides the perceived rigor and accountability required in the political climate. Ongoing research is required to develop the potential for situated contextual learning and to develop partnerships with professionals in the field, this in the face of opposition to changes in institutional structures.

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