

INTEGRATED CAMPUS AND FIELD-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION: DIFFERENCES IN PREPARING STUDENT TEACHERS

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Paper presented at BC research symposium, Vancouver SFU Harbor Center 2002

An extended version of this paper can be found at <http://articles/CJE/fieldbase3years.htm>

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) 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.

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 each year. 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

The importance of teaching a university methods class within a school context is based on the concept 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. 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. 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 -- a field-based teacher education course.

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 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. 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, 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.

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. For example, a principal telling student teachers that when he started teaching “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.” All the student teachers came to see management as an issue of respect with students, not a threat to them. Other teachers told their stories of becoming teachers. Student teachers commented: “I was blown away,” “he opened my eyes” and “I have never been so interested in what one person has had to say.”

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.

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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