

Overcoming Prospective Teachers' Beliefs Through Coursework and Collaborative Decision Making with the Professional Development Schools

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Educators have struggled with barriers to reform for decades. One of the most chronically persistent barriers to educational reform has been prospective teachers' beliefs about teaching, learning, and pupils. These beliefs are a product of enculturation in traditional school settings. For example, prospective teachers enter teacher preparation programs with the beliefs that teaching is transmitting knowledge by telling, learning is passive reception of knowledge, and pupils are either good students or bad students based on their ability to attend to the recitation script of traditional classroom experience. Changing prospective teachers' beliefs is a complex process involving exploration of existing flawed beliefs, confrontation of these flawed beliefs, and intervention to replace flawed beliefs with new conceptions. Over the years, some teacher educators have attempted to explore, confront, and intervene to change prospective teachers' flawed beliefs through stimulating coursework, discussion about constructivist pedagogy, and modeling best teaching practices. In spite of these good intentions, the discouraging fact is that many new teachers find themselves teaching exactly as they were taught when they went to school. Why is this so? A litany of research reveals that field experiences that do not articulate teacher education coursework often have negative effects on changing prior beliefs about teaching. Exciting, innovative theory learned in college classrooms is filtered away and viewed as an intrusion of anomalous data if it is not immediately applicable to prospective teachers' experience of "real world" teaching. Simply stated, field experiences often convince prospective teachers that schools do not want the kind of teachers their college professors want. Prospective teachers ultimately filter away their undergraduate teacher preparation coursework and resume the teaching posture of their ancestors.

Even some of the more radical, philosophical reconceptualizations professed in the new middle school movement have been powerless to effect the kind of sustained change in prospective teachers' beliefs that add up to transformational educational reform. One would think that new schools designed to accommodate such restructuring as teaming and flexible block scheduling would certainly effect change in prospective teachers' beliefs. However, new buildings, teachers working in teams, and longer blocks of instructional time are not sufficient to change prospective teachers' beliefs if curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in schools are inconsistent with teacher preparation coursework. In fact, field experiences often confirm prospective teachers' suspicions that teacher preparation coursework is "fluff" and out of touch with the real world of the classroom.

Successful lab experiences must enable prospective teachers to experience not only continuity of theory and practice, but must enable prospective teachers to positively interact with children in dynamically structured, authentic settings. Opportunities for both summative and formative reflection and feedback must also be provided. Augusta State University's teacher development curriculum, which includes a partnership with its surrounding Professional Development Schools (PDS), has confronted the inability of teacher preparation to effect sustained change by designing education courses containing seven weeks of initial instructional time, five weeks of daily field experience, and three weeks of reflective activity. A further intervention strategy for changing prospective teachers' beliefs is to arrange course content pedagogy around the intended outcomes of field experiences. This kind of planning necessitates jointly constructing field experience activities with classroom teachers and providing coursework that supports the intended meanings of these activities. Students are then more apt to be motivated in making meaning of their coursework as it aims to prepare them for immediate performance in their labs. Most people learn on a "need to know" basis and it is the job of good educators to create the "need to know" in the minds of their students by insisting on real world applications of their understandings. Teacher educators concerned with "best practices" help themselves by making the connections between their coursework and performance in the school classroom. Furthermore, teacher educators must pursue the classroom teachers' assistance in the development of teacher preparation coursework.

The Augusta State University PDS initiative applauds the initiation of teacher owned and operated classroom field experiences. This process was initiated this fall semester at the middle grades level with the help of public school building coordinators and myself, a university consultant, who met with various teams of teachers to elicit their assistance in designing lab tasks for my students. My students are enrolled in both middle school organization and middle grades social studies content pedagogy courses. Classroom teachers who participate in the collaborative decision making of the design of lab activities are more apt to be conscious of equipping generous learning environments. Likewise, teachers empowered to share in the upbringing of prospective teachers tend to hold themselves accountable for the future of school culture by providing demonstration classrooms. I presented our initiative as an opportunity for prospective teachers to: (1) complement classroom teachers' ongoing instructional strategies, (2) provide specific assistance for their own particular class-

room needs, and (3) experience the definite articulation of conceptual framework principles presented in teacher preparation coursework that are found in everyday classroom practice.

Given the necessary planning time, the teachers working in teams consistently suggested lab activities similar to each other's as well as those I envisioned. The activities were summarily constructed to include: (1) working with children in small groups for remediation; (2) assisting with team planning of interdisciplinary units; and (3) teaching mini-lessons within the units. After receiving input from the various teams of middle school teachers, my students and I were able to co-construct the kind of coursework assignments needed to prepare them for their ensuing field experience. These students did not just talk about constructivist pedagogy, they were able to live it. Students appreciated the potential practical application of their newly acquired understandings. All coursework was needs-based and contextualized by its relationship to an anticipated lab experience. Reading assignments were not viewed as busy work or filler. Written assignments were transformed into information sharing sessions on a topics-based Internet news group. Collaboration on the planning of an interdisciplinary unit was not viewed as just another hoop with a rubric, but as an authentic experiential preparation for lab. Any information I provided either took place informally while students worked in groups planning their interdisciplinary unit or as a demonstration in direct response to student requests. The "need to know" was created and precisely exploited.

I added two other activities to allow students to reflect on their experience and have an opportunity to compare what they experienced with their understandings of "true" middle school philosophy. The first of these two activities is called the Middle School Journal. This Journal is a culminating activity intended to give prospective teachers a creative format for evaluating middle school theory and the practices found in their field experience. Prospective teachers look for instances of shared decision making, community involvement, team planning, flex scheduling, an effective advisory program, etc. The second activity is a weekly, electronic journal (listserv) used by the prospective teachers and me to discuss a wide array of problems found in the various labs placements. An additional effect of the electronic journal is the support prospective teachers give one another when imperfections in lab experiences surface. These imperfections are unable to fester into the kind of negative effects of field experiences mentioned earlier. Instead of whining and commiserating, prospective teach-

ers encourage each other to persevere and learn from their experiences.

We are enthusiastic about the long-range results of this experience on effecting sustained change in the classroom. Students appear to be prepared to work in the various settings and classroom teachers have been empowered to assess student performance based on their ability to fulfill the goals of our conceptual framework principles. What happens when the classroom teacher shares in the ownership of teacher preparation? We are all anxious to find out. At a recent PDS meeting, team leaders reported that lab students in my courses "are prepared, involved, and clearly focused about their activities." Team teachers can give themselves a pat on the back for their willingness to participate in my students' success. Other early reports this semester are coming in via the electronic journal. One lab student wrote, "The team of teachers that I'm working with have been extremely appreciative of my help and dedication to them and their students. This is a great boost for me! I have also done a lot of research and work to help the teachers get their interdisciplinary unit ready."

Another lab student shared, "The language arts teacher uses the writing workshop method in her classroom and she makes adjustments in her lessons for kids with special needs. She teaches to multiple intelligences." Teaching in this environment is no longer viewed as the presentation of "inert" subject matter. Teaching is the contextualized managerial assistance provided by an individual or team of individuals trained in the art of implementing the best research based practices.

Augusta State University's PDS model strives to disabuse prospective teachers' antecedent flawed beliefs about teaching and learning with a more powerful strategy than the mere exploration, confrontation, and intervention found in traditional teacher preparation coursework discourse. The model articulates teacher preparation coursework with a classroom teacher-designed field experience. Prospective teachers have plenty of opportunity to reflect upon their experience through an ongoing e-mail discussion list as well as a time to debrief at the end of the semester. Furthermore, this is not just a one-semester experience. Each education course is tied to a lab that enables prospective teachers to have a continuity of experience throughout their teacher preparation program. As we listen to lab students and teachers talk about the quality of their experiences, we expect to make changes necessary to meet the needs of the school community and satisfy the ongoing demands of living constructivist pedagogy.