

An intensive sophomore field experience for preservice teachers.

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Can you remember the day when teacher preparation programs rarely included sophomore, or even junior, practicum experiences? When the first significant field experience for most preservice teachers was student teaching'.

One needn't be a dinosaur to recall those days. They may be a great distance, philosophically, from where most schools of education are today, but they were not actually so many years ago.

Teacher preparation has come a long way from what seemed, to many if not most preservice teachers, a series of fairly abstract, and often uninteresting, foundation and methods courses, followed by the sink-or-swim experience of student teaching. Almost all teacher education programs today include at least one, and often two, semester-long junior practicum experiences that involves observing, interacting, and teaching practice lessons in regular classrooms. And an increasing number of programs also include a sophomore field experience of some kind.

These sophomore field experiences typically involve a number of fairly brief visits to different classrooms for observations. Because these experiences are intended to be introductory in nature, it is often assumed that a wide variety of experiences will give a broad, if superficial, overview of what classrooms are like.

There is a problem with this assumption, however. Neophyte teachers are generally not good observers of what goes on in a classroom, due to lack of knowledge of the kind of things to look for and attend to and lack of understanding of the teaching-learning process. The result is that a series of brief, unstructured classroom observations may be rather unproductive. Or the result may be even worse than unproductive, because as unskilled observers, sophomore teachers-in-training may misunderstand what they see. What they may "learn" is a confirmation of false beliefs based on mistaken ideas about the nature of the teaching-learning process.

Imagine three college sophomores observing a third-grade mathematics lesson. (We are borrowing this example from Deborah Loewenberg Ball's 1992 article "Magical Hopes.") Students are discussing odd and even numbers, and there is a lively debate about whether the number six is odd or even. One student shows that six could be represented by either two groups of three or three groups of two, and concludes that six is both odd and even. Soon students are experimenting with counters of some kind in small groups, without any apparent direction from their teacher, to gather other evidence. One student points out that ten could also be either odd or even by the same reasoning that the first student claimed this for the number six. A lively debate ensues about what it means for a number to be odd and even and about the nature of numbers and the different ways they might be represented. Although the teacher poses occasional questions and frequently asks students to summarize the different ideas being expressed, she doesn't tell student that six and ten are not odd numbers. Our three sophomores might well come away from this observation dismayed at the stupidity of the teacher. Imagine the conversation in the car on the way home. "Didn't she know that six and ten are even? How could someone get to be a teacher without knowing what odd and even numbers are? Boy, she really got those kids confused." "Year, and she had no control of those kids at all. Remember when some of them got out those bags of coins or whatever they were and were playing with them on their desks?" "That teacher is a real loser. I'm glad we don't have to go back there."

Of course, misunderstandings of this kind will occur; and sometimes, if we're lucky, they can lead to new insights. The students might, for example, discuss this episode in the education class they are taking in conjunction with the field experience, or write about it in their journals, in a way that their professor can understand what actually was going on; the professor might then use this experience to introduce the idea of a constructivist approach to teaching mathematics. But more often, such misunderstandings will not be reported, and even less often will they be reported in ways that the professor, who necessarily cannot be present in all the field experience classrooms at all times, will understand what was actually going on. Unfortunately, most misunderstandings of this kind will not lead to teachable moments. They will simply become part of what the students "learn" in their teacher education field experience.

There is, of course, no way to avoid all misunderstandings or turn them all into new insights and understanding. But there are ways to organize field experiences to make it less likely that such misunderstandings will pass unchallenged. By providing an intensive field experience in the same classroom with an experienced teacher mentor, rather than a shotgun approach that sends sophomores hither and yon for a variety of field experiences, we can reduce the likelihood of solidifying misunderstandings and confirming misconceptions. We can also make the time students spend in their field experiences more productive, interesting, and motivating.

Ideally, perhaps, all field experiences would take place in laboratory schools associated with a college of education. That way the classroom teachers can mentor preservice teachers in all their field experiences and discuss with students what they are observing. The Holmes group is probably right in suggesting this as a model of teacher preparation programs; however, for most teacher preparation programs, this may not be feasible.

Partnerships with local school districts can provide many of the benefits of a laboratory school setting. At Rider University we have several such partnerships with nearby school systems. The first of these partnerships, developed five years ago with the Lawrence Township School District, provides an intensive field experience for sophomore elementary education majors. We believe that this "Sophomore Experience" program is more successful in preparing sophomores to become teachers (and to benefit from their junior-year methods classes) than the shotgun approach of sending them to a variety of schools in the hope that they will gain a broad overview of what happens in schools. We hope that other teacher preparation programs will find it a useful model.

We work with about 25 students each semester who take two courses - Contexts of Schooling and Developmental Educational Psychology - at the same time, in either the fall or spring semester of their sophomore year. (These are the first two courses in our education sequence.) Both classes meet two days each week, one from 8:00-9:20 am, the other from 12:50-2:10 p.m. From 9:40 until 12:00 noon the students are assigned, in groups of three or four, to elementary school classrooms.

This field experience lasts the entire semester. It starts with an orientation meeting of all 25 students, the six classroom teachers, and the school administrators who work with the program. Our students learn from the Assistant Superintendent about the school system's goals, student population, and administrative structure; they meet with the teachers and learn about the students in their classes; and they come away from the meeting at once sobered by the awesome responsibility of teaching and excited about meeting and working with the elementary school students.

Both professors visit the field site classrooms regularly, generally visiting each classroom about once every two weeks. The students begin by observing but are soon integrated into the classroom activities in various ways by the field site teachers. On most days the field site teachers have some opportunity during the time their sophomores are in their classrooms to discuss students' observations and activities with them. Students also keep reaction notebooks in the field site classroom in which they ask questions for the teachers to respond to later.

Why do we think this works better than providing a wide variety of field experiences? First, even though we can't be in every field site classroom every day, we know what's going on in those classrooms because we know the teachers well. When students describe an activity we didn't observe, it's easy for us to imagine what was actually happening.

Misunderstandings still occur, of course, and we don't catch them all in our class discussions or review of students' written work. Fortunately, we don't need to, as most of these misunderstandings are ferreted out in interactions with the field experience teachers (who can generally do a better job than we could, as they are both on the scene and directly involved).

We both like to use case studies as part of our teaching. When many of the cases we discuss are based on actual observations of our students, the analysis of case studies becomes an even more powerful tool. Of course, not every concept or technique that we want to discuss in our classes has a direct tie-in to what is happening in the field site classrooms, but most connect in some way, and the students are encouraged to discover these connections. It's difficult for most college sophomores to relate to ideas like a "developmentally appropriate curriculum" or the "goal structure of a classroom" in the abstract, but when they know one classroom and one group of students rather well, they apply these ideas to the "real world" with gusto!

There are other benefits of this intensive "Sophomore Experience." The field site teachers are very carefully chosen because we want them to be both excellent models as teachers and helpful mentors to fledgling teachers-in-training. And even though the field site classrooms are in several different schools in the Lawrence Township School District, the group of teachers (and some of their principals) meet regularly to discuss the program and ways to improve it. Rather than being a minor nuisance in the classrooms, as is the case when preservice teachers visit a particular classroom just once or twice, the sophomores become a part of the classrooms where they work and are soon put to work by the teachers. Although they are not ready to plan or teach a lesson, they are quite able to help as table leaders or tutors. The students know them and turn to them as they might to an aide in the classroom, and the teachers often comment on how helpful it is to have them there.

The program grows continually stronger each year as the field site teachers discover new ways to induct our sophomores into teaching and share these approaches with their colleagues. The field site teachers also have gotten to know our courses quite well - they are given course syllabi and copies of texts used by the students, and they frequently relate what's happening in class to things students have read. Often the field site teachers are more effective than we are in convincing our sophomores of the importance of the ideas they are studying in their college courses because they can relate those ideas to real experiences, and real elementary school students, that the sophomores have come to know well.

Our students also interact with other school personnel. They interview the principal, meet with the child study team to learn more about inclusion and writing I.E.P.'s, and go with students to art, the computer lab, or other special classrooms. And once each semester the sophomores spend an entire day in the classroom.

For most of our students, this first field experience greatly increases their motivation to become teachers. In fact, our students look forward to going to their field site classes so much that many go over breaks and after the semester ends. There are occasional students, who discover, as sophomores, that teaching really isn't for them after all - which is a better thing to learn as a sophomore than as a junior or senior.

The "Sophomore Experience" is a maturing one for most students, and one that helps them begin to see themselves as teachers as well as students. For many, this transformation begins with the simple surprise of hearing themselves addressed as "Ms. Jones" or "Mr. Smith" rather than "Wanda" or "Tony." The sophomores come to be treated as additional teachers by the elementary school students, who refer to them as their "Rider teachers." This experience helps the "Rider teachers" begin to understand the need to act professionally as they interact with

students and also the importance of coming to class prepared and knowledgeable. It is a first, large step in preservice teachers' taking on their future professional role as teachers, and it also helps them "hit the ground running" in their junior-year methods classes and field experiences.

The collaboration between college and school system isn't limited to the hours our sophomores are working in the schools. The teachers have made some very valuable suggestions about how to structure our program; several professors have offered inservice programs for the school district; and the school district and college have worked together on grant applications.

There are costs to this intensive field experience in the sophomore year. The main cost is students' time. Although almost all the students love the time they spend at their field sites, it is a substantial time commitment. It also takes times to get a program like this started - although once in operation, it is probably easier to run than a program that sends students to many different, and often largely unknown, classrooms to sit in the back and observe teachers.

Our teacher preparation program is a developmental one, and what is expected of sophomores in their field experiences is very different than what is expected in their junior-year field experience, when they take on more aspects of the role of teacher. Development, whether of young children or preservice teachers, takes time. The three intensive, semester-long pre-student teaching field experiences that our students have, beginning as sophomores, allow them (and us) to observe, to monitor, to guide, and to reflect on this developmental process.

Each field experience provides different opportunities for reflection about what it means to be a teacher, as well as about how the various ideas and techniques presented in education classes are part of the teaching-learning process. An intensive sophomore field experience provides a strong foundation for the developmental and reflective process of becoming a professional educator. We believe this "Sophomore Experience" has a significant and very positive long-term impact on the kinds of teachers our students become.

References

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