

Takin' It to the Streets:

A Collaborative Self-Study into Social Studies Field Instruction

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Abstract

This paper reports on the processes and outcomes of a collaborative self-study conducted by three beginning teacher educators who sought to examine the efficacy of their teaching practices while working with student teachers in the field. By systematically embracing opportunities to explore mutually pressing issues and concerns manifest across the student teaching semester, the authors found that collaborative self-study provided a useful framework for considering their pedagogical reasoning and decision making as they encouraged student teachers to engage in rationale-based practice. The understandings gleaned from this study provided the authors with a basis upon which to reexamine their developing teacher educator pedagogies, as well as to critique the nature and structure of their teacher education program.

Introduction

Research indicates that teacher education programs have questionable influences on student teachers' beliefs and practices (see Clift & Brady, 2005; Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Bullough and Gitlin (2001) claim that "beginning teachers often do not think their teacher education has had much of an impact on their learning" (p. 198). When an impact is reported, it is usually attributed to the student teaching experience. Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy (2001) noted, "Experienced and newly certified teachers alike see clinical experiences as a powerful—sometimes the single most powerful—element of teacher preparation" (p. 2).

Given the significance commonly associated with the student teaching experience as a vital component of teacher preparation, it is ironic that field-based teacher education is not highly valued by most schools or universities (see Bullough, 2005; Zeichner, 2002). In part, this

paradox stems from the notion that teacher education is a “self-evident activity” (Zeichner, 2005, p. 118). It is typically assumed “that a good teacher will also make a good teacher educator” (Korthagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005, p. 110). A serious consequence of this assumption, at least in terms of the university’s role in teacher preparation, is that the work of teacher education in the field is commonly relegated to newly-appointed graduate students who receive little-to-no formal training as to how to function in their new positions (Kremer-Hayon & Zuzovsky, 1995; Louie, Stackman, Drevdahl, & Purdy, 2002; Zeichner, 2002).

At the time of this study, the authors of this paper found themselves in just such a situation. As second-year doctoral students in a social studies education program at a “Doctoral/Research University—Extensive” (McCormick, 2001) in the Southeastern United States, our assistantship duties included supervising and mentoring student teachers. In an attempt to better understand the complexities of what we considered important work with student teachers, we engaged in a collaborative self-study of our field-based teaching practices as beginning teacher educators. Acting as both researchers and participants, our inquiry centered on exploring the notion of how we might make a difference with student teachers by establishing the necessary conditions and creating the kinds of learning opportunities capable of influencing their beliefs and practices.

Research Frame and Context

Situated within a constructivist framework, we operated from the viewpoint that teacher education is a learning problem as opposed to a technical training problem (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Based on the premise that “teaching itself is an intellectual, cultural, and contextually local activity” (p. 2), this perspective recognizes that educators work in variable environments largely shaped by the social interactions of their participants. The resulting social construction of reality produces competing and constantly changing tensions that blur the line between “good” and “bad” decisions both within and across educational contexts. Understood in this light, there is not necessarily a single right way to teach that will always lead to desirable outcomes for all learners.

One of the central goals of teacher education, therefore, must be to somehow prepare pre-service teachers to find beneficial and defensible ways to negotiate such unstable conditions with and for their students. As Dinkelman (2004) noted in a reflection of his own work as a teacher educator, “Framed in this way, the challenges of helping new teachers develop their rationales are as much my own learning problems as theirs” (p. 15). Although not easy, understanding teacher education as a learning problem allows for the consideration and nurturance of aspects of a teacher’s pedagogy that resist assimilation to a technical model. Such vital aspects of a teacher’s pedagogy, largely ignored by technical approaches to teacher preparation, are exemplified in Shulman’s (1987) work on “pedagogical content knowledge,” Clandinin’s (1985) work on teacher “images” and “personal practical knowledge,” and Schön’s (1983, 1987) work on “reflective practitioners,” among others.

Given this conceptual framework, it is important to describe the underlying context of our work. A significant component of our teacher education program involves preservice teachers developing a rationale for their teaching which centers on the question of purpose, or what they are teaching social studies *for*. Ideally the process of developing a rationale compels preservice teachers to wrestle with questions of what is worth knowing and how best to teach that

knowledge or those skills and values. In this sense, the rationale is pitched as a foundation for teacher decision making, albeit with the understanding that it will always be evolving.

The rationale is first developed as the capstone assignment of each student's initial experience in the program. Students who wish to be admitted into the program must first complete this course (ESOC 2450) and its connected field experience (ESOC 2450L) before applying for admission into the program itself. The course focuses on the nature of social studies as a field of educational study with particular emphasis placed on the various political and philosophical viewpoints that are part of the discourse in the field. In the field experience, students are encouraged to consider what they see and do in classrooms through the many lenses provided to them in ESOC 2450, all the while working toward a coherent articulation of a defensible rationale for teaching social studies. Though the extent to which a rationale might be defined as "defensible" is certainly open to question and varies from student to student and from instructor to instructor in 2450, in general, students are encouraged to ground their insights in the literature to which they are exposed in the course and to base it also on the contexts and content of their field experiences.

At the completion of the course, students who wish to apply for admission to the social studies program must submit their rationales as part of the application packet. Each rationale is then scored by members of the department (typically graduate student field instructors, though some full-time faculty also participate) and considered along with a student's grade point average across certain "core" courses to determine which students are admitted to the program. Since social studies education is considered a "high demand" major at the university, competition tends to be keen. This competitive element of the rationale development process complicates questions of whether or not students are formally articulating rationales they are willing to truly call their own. Furthermore, the program has committed itself to the use of rationales in the admissions process on the basis of the notion that rationales offer key insights into the thinking of the teachers the program will produce.

At the conclusion of the admissions process, however, the rationales themselves receive uneven attention. Following the initial field experience in ESOC 2450/2450L, students then proceed to a methods/curriculum block of two courses designed to address the "nuts and bolts" of effective teaching practice. Theoretically, the rationale developed in 2450 should continue to be part of the learning process, especially given the emphasis placed on rationale-based practice in the early stages of the program experience. More often than not, however, the rationale is not considered to be an integral part of the methods/curriculum block (except where certain instructors—ourselves included—have worked for it to be). The semester immediately following the methods/curriculum block is the semester in which students complete their student teaching experiences. The student teaching semester represents the first opportunity for the rationales students developed in 2450 and, hopefully, refined in methods/curriculum to be applied in practice.

During the student teaching semester, each preservice teacher is observed by a university-based field instructor at least four times. These observation visits consist of three phases: a thirty minute pre-observation conference, an observation of the student teacher teaching an entire class period, and an hour long post-observation conference. As field instructors, the authors of this paper are committed to encouraging student teachers to implement rationale-based practice and to continue the work they began in their initial field and classroom experiences in the program. More specifically, given our collective commitment to "teaching against the grain" (see Cochran-Smith, 1991, 2004), we are dedicated to encouraging student teachers to implement

rationale-based practice responsive to the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching in varying contexts. Engaging in this process can be extremely difficult because many student teachers, perhaps overwhelmed by the realities of the classroom as viewed from their new perspectives as teachers (see Cole & Knowles, 1993), fail to see their rationales as viable ways to deal with their perceived problems. In our experience, student teachers are hesitant to use the goals stated in their rationales to develop answers to their own problems of practice and consequently revert to uncritically teaching in the same ways in which they were taught.

Throughout the student teaching semester, students attend weekly or bi-weekly (every other week) seminar meetings where they share their experiences with one another and attempt to link their work to established standards of effective practice approved by the state in which the university is located. Finally, at the conclusion of the semester, students present electronic portfolios to their peers and to the larger community. These “e-portfolios” are expected to link the academic and intellectual work students have done in the program to their actual field experiences and to the framework of teaching standards emphasized in the student teaching seminar. The theoretical key to the e-portfolio is the rationale: the personal statement of philosophy upon which each student’s work in the program is supposed to be based.

In this study, we have chosen to focus on one critical component of the rationale development process: field instruction during student teaching. Student teaching is often perceived to be the time that student teachers cut their ties to the programs from which they have emerged and begin to immerse themselves in the socio-cultural contexts of the schools in which they teach. On one hand, field instruction is perceived as a kind of “lifeline,” connecting student teachers to the program from whence they have come; on the other, it can also be seen as a critically important teaching opportunity that reinforces the program’s core themes and ideas within the context of field-based teaching experiences. This is the approach the three of us have taken as field instructors, and it is an approach we have explored to various degrees through this study.

Such is our situated practice of teacher education as it most often exists in the field. In this regard, we see field instruction as an opportunity to take teacher education “into the streets,” into the contexts where it matters most. The relative safety and stability once provided by classrooms in colleges of education no longer exist either for field instructors or for their students during student teaching. If, and how, teacher education in this context is viewed as meaningful by student teachers remains unclear, which complicates the work of teacher educators in the field. Nonetheless, it is within this milieu of competing tensions that our work is situated.

Methodology

Collaborative Self-study

In a recent review of the literature, Russell (2004) suggested that self-study represents an increasingly popular and promising research methodology that has emerged from, but also built upon, work done in the fields of reflective practice (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987), action research (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, 2000), and practitioner research (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Although there is some ambiguity surrounding the term, self-study is generally understood as a “critical examination of one’s actions and the context of those

actions in order to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, and impulse” (Samaras, 2002, p. xxiv).

In terms of objectives, LaBoskey (2004b) argued that researchers involved in self-study desire “to generate local, situated, provisional knowledge of teaching” as well as “trigger further deliberations, explorations, and change by other educators in their contexts” (p. 1170). In a similar vein, Cole and Knowles (1998a) suggest that:

Teacher educators, many of whom were classroom teachers prior to entering the academy as university-based educators, engage in self-study both for purposes of their own personal professional development and for broader purposes of enhanced understanding of teacher education practices, processes, programs, and contexts. (p. 42)

As such, to some extent, all researchers who engage in self-study of their teaching practices agree with Berry and Loughran (2005) that “it is through ‘unpacking’ pedagogical experiences that understanding the complexity of teaching can come to the fore” (p. 173). As beginning teacher educators committed to improving our practice, we recognized self-study as a promising way for us to both inform and be informed by our situated practice in the field.

Although the specific methods used in self-studies may vary, the “common element is the reflective, critical examination of the self’s involvement both in aspects of the study and in the phenomenon under study” (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 240). Contrary to what the name might imply, self-study is not wholly synonymous with personal reflection. According to Loughran and Northfield (1998), “Reflection is a personal process of thinking, refining, reframing, and developing actions. Self-study takes these processes and makes them public, thus leading to another series of processes that need to reside outside of the individual” (p. 15). For this study, we engaged in critical reflection through individual journaling; however, we also attempted to extend such examinations through our collaborative efforts in further collecting and analyzing data. Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, and Stackman (2003) argued that collaboration in self-study has at least three significant benefits, including increased social support, higher-level discourse and critique owing to the creation of a culture of reflectiveness, and an increased chance to create transferable knowledge by avoiding solipsism.

Ultimately, this study was undertaken with the understanding that self-study “is essentially being thoughtful—in a Deweyan sense—about one’s work. It is reflective inquiry, similar to that widely advocated for teachers” (Cole & Knowles, 1998a, p. 42). This realization led Dinkelman (2003) to argue that “self-study serves a dual purpose: as a means to promote reflective thinking and as a substantive end of teacher education in its own right” (p. 7). By using self-study as a means to promote reflective teaching with student teachers, this study focused our efforts to improve our practice as teacher educators (Dinkelman, 2003; Johnston, 2006). Just as we were encouraging student teachers to reflect on their developing rationales, we were compelled to “rethink and to reinterpret [our] actions and the underlying rationale” for our pedagogical decision making as teacher educators in the field (Montecinos, Cnudde, Ow, Solis, Suzuki, & Riveros, 2002, p. 782).

Study Design, Methods, and Analysis

All of the data sources for this study were intended to focus on exploring the notion of how we might make a difference with student teachers by establishing the necessary conditions and creating the kinds of learning opportunities capable of influencing their beliefs and practices. For the length of one academic semester (Spring 2006), each of us kept reflective journals and wrote formal observation reports following every meeting we held with each of our student teachers. As a group, we worked with fifteen student teachers. Since each student teacher was observed four times over the course of the semester, we ultimately drafted a total of 60 journal entries and 60 observation reports between us to serve as data sources.

Additionally, we used our reflections and observation reports to create two other sources of data. The first of these consisted of narrative summaries written after each of the four rounds of student teacher observations. Essentially, we reviewed our reflections and observation reports and then drafted reflective narrative summaries of what we viewed as the most substantial challenges in our work. As a group, we created 12 of these summaries. The written summaries were then read prior to four, audio-taped, conferences as a way to stimulate conversation regarding the challenges of field-based teacher education. The collaborative conferences were transcribed in their entirety to offer us our last data source.

Each of the four aforementioned data sources was narrative in nature. Since each source included data collected by three different individuals in a similar set of circumstances, we decided to make sense of the information by employing what Polkinghorne (1995) referred to as paradigmatic analysis of narrative data. In this type of analysis, researchers allow themes to emerge from the data. Using an inductive approach and the constant comparative method, each of the authors individually examined the data sources for emergent themes as they related to our research problem. We then met as a group to discuss our individual findings, focusing on both the similarities and differences of our interpretations. Through this process of analysis, we collaboratively forged a more inclusive and coherent picture of what our study revealed. The findings were deemed acceptable by each of the authors.

Findings

Collaborative self-study provided us with an appropriate framework for considering the efficacy of our pedagogical reasoning and decision-making as beginning teacher educators. By sharing our common issues and concerns, we were able to recognize and explore mutually pressing themes manifest across the student teaching experience. In particular, this study led to sustained discussion around the following questions:

1. How might our different approaches enhance or constrain our work in the field?
2. What role(s) do we, or should we, play as field instructors?
3. What are the challenges of promoting rationale-based practice?

Our conversations regarding these themes served as the basis for reexamining our developing teacher educator pedagogies and reconsidering our ways of promoting rationale-based practices. Additionally, our conversations yielded new insights that allowed us to critique the nature and structure of our teacher education program, as well as to develop a set of recommended

adjustments designed to improve the learning experiences of our preservice teachers. For the sake of clarity, please note that we use the author's first names in the following sections.

How might our different approaches enhance or constrain our work in the field? One regular point of discussion during our collaborative conferences concerned how each of us conduct our post-observation conferences and what that might indicate about our goals as field instructors. From the beginning, there was much discussion about the place of routine as part of post-observation conferences. Not surprisingly, our varied approaches suggested a great deal about our individual visions of powerful social studies teaching and learning and the impact those visions have on our practice as field instructors.

For example, Jason believes it important to begin his series of field observations with a way to “hook student teachers on the idea of active student engagement and how it is necessary for learning to occur” (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, January 25, 2006). Jason takes this path because he says active student engagement is “easier to define than worthwhile learning” (the other component of the program's basic definition of “good teaching”), but he also explains:

It is easier to get student teachers to buy into it because, once you break the term down, no one really objects to the fact that someone has to think about something, regardless of learning style or anything else, in order for it to be meaningful. (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, February 4, 2006)

This routine reflects Jason's interest in pointing out the discrepancy between what students say they would like to do and what they actually do in the classroom when he is there to observe them. By encouraging student teachers to clarify their understandings of active student engagement and its role in student learning, Jason hopes to provide a basis for later questioning of their choices in the classroom. At the same time, this early questioning of the student teacher's basic assumptions can provide a valuable benchmark for making sense of how the student teacher is navigating the transition from “student” to “student teacher.”

Todd's approach to post-observation conferences is similar in many ways to Jason's except that his routine involves focusing on the student teacher's rationale before exploring the idea of active student engagement. For Todd, the first observation is a chance to “see where they are in terms of their understanding of the purpose of a rationale” (T.S. Hawley, personal communication, February 4, 2006). Todd believes that a field instructor can learn a lot from “the amount of time the student teachers put into trying to explain how their lessons relate to their rationales” (T. S. Hawley, personal communication, February 4, 2006). In particular, Todd thinks such a focus helps him to gauge how much teaching he will need to do in terms of exploring the purposes behind developing and/or using a rationale. Todd also concentrates on the ways student teachers think about their rationales as a means to determine where they are in terms of “believing in them,” as opposed to just “thinking it was crap they wrote to get into the department” (T.S. Hawley, personal communication, January 22, 2006). This approach reflects Todd's interest in the power of rationale-based practice and acknowledges the very real problem of students viewing the development of their rationales as a hoop they must jump through to gain admission to the social studies program.

In contrast, Dave is only minimally concerned with promoting major terms and ideas of the program in his early field visits. Instead, Dave is most interested in discussing with student teachers how they selected the content they chose to teach and what they hoped their students

would learn from the experience. In this way, his work as a field instructor is much more contextually-based than either Jason's or Todd's. During one of Dave's first observations in an economics class, for example, the student teacher led her class in a trivia-style review game that led Dave to wonder, "Why is it exactly that these kids are in here answering these types of questions and what value does this content have for them?" (D. Powell, personal communication, February 2, 2006). According to Dave, the following was incredibly confusing:

What was most intriguing about the lesson was how I didn't care that they were playing baseball, or how they did it...all of that was fine. What was interesting to me was what she was asking them to know—I didn't think what she was asking them to know was very valuable. (D. Powell, personal communication, February 4, 2006)

In the subsequent post-observation conference, Dave focused explicitly on this question with the student teacher. Although the focus of his questioning may not have included the terms "active engagement" or "worthwhile learning," Dave did attempt to encourage the student teacher to reflect on the nature of the lesson and what she hoped to accomplish by teaching it.

Owing to the obvious differences in our field-based approaches, a pressing issue for us centered upon how our individual approaches might enhance or constrain our opportunities for effective field instruction. As it turned out, our main concerns did emerge from our conversations on the routines that we seemed to fall into after two years of working as field instructors. These concerns fell into two distinct categories: One entailed possibly following the "wrong" path, and the other revolved around the time constraints presented by only completing four observations during the student teaching semester.

Jason's experience best illustrates the concerns that were raised on the first point. For him, the routine of starting with active student engagement and then proceeding to worthwhile learning was a way of "hooking" the student teachers and pushing their thinking on how and why students learn. During our collaborative conferences, he began to wonder if he might be "missing opportunities by not focusing on the different contextual concerns of different student teachers at different schools" (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, February 28, 2006). His expressed concerns represent our collective fear of sticking too closely to the standard terms of the program and missing other potentially more powerful learning opportunities.

The second concern focused our attention on the limitations inherent in having time to complete only four observations with each student teacher. Todd worried that his routine of focusing on the developing rationale of each student teacher during the first post-observation conference limited him to "only having three more conferences to do anything" with this new focus on their rationales (T.S. Hawley, personal communication, January 26, 2006). One consequence of Todd's approach was that it usually resulted in student teachers developing the ability to talk in more sophisticated ways about their rationales, even as they struggled to articulate any connection between the stated purpose of the rationale and their actual teaching practice during observations.

Ultimately our collaboration prompted us to examine the potential of having student teachers prepare to discuss the goals of their rationales at the first observation meeting but also to explore how they might use the notion of active engagement to promote student learning before the student teaching semester even begins. This small shift in approach carries tremendous potential for both improving the practice of student teachers and for providing research-based reform within our teacher education program. To these ends, collaborative self-study raised

important questions and helped to provide new ways of thinking. Through our conferences following each round of observations, we were able to move beyond simply presenting what we did, and we began to discuss ways we could learn from each other as we imagined new ways of doing teacher education in the field.

What role(s) do we, or should we, play as field instructors? Another result of our collaborative conferences was that they sparked a prolonged discussion about the role of field instructors during student teaching. Questions that guided us: As field instructors, are we teachers or simply evaluators sent to represent the interests of the larger teacher education program? Who decides which role we should play? How does the role we play impact our expectations regarding how we conceptualize the work we want to do with our student teachers?

The aforementioned questions and the space we created to answer them pushed our thinking in new ways. An example from our collaborative conferences came from Dave:

I'll just throw this out now, although I hadn't really thought about it much in terms of my role as a field instructor...I don't see it as, "I'm the university supervisor, the person who comes out to make sure what you are doing jives with what we are doing at the university. My job is to come out here and evaluate your teaching in the sense that I am trying to find the value that exists within it and expose that and get you to talk about it." (D. Powell, personal communication, February 28, 2006)

While each of us was in full agreement with Dave's statement, we still felt that more needed to be done to help explain the type of work field instructors should be doing when they came out to conduct their four observations—as a way, perhaps, of guiding the work of field instructors—but also to provide student teachers with a clear sense of what the field instructor was there to do.

This, in turn, led to lengthy conversations about what such changes would mean for our practice as teacher educators working in the field and how the program could begin to discuss the “teaching” aspect of our work with student teachers before the start of student teaching. As an example, consider the following statement from Todd:

I guess I would like to have the student teachers view me as someone who can be more of a teacher for them than this evaluator that comes out...I think that is what I was getting at earlier in terms of if they understood what our role was it would make that first session more productive. (T.S. Hawley, personal communication, February 28, 2006)

Taking things one step further, Dave concluded that he would like “to be able to teach student teachers about teaching” while working with them during their student teaching semester (D. Powell, personal communication, February 15, 2006).

Along these lines, we continued to discuss the degree to which we felt free to pursue our own visions of good teaching while working with student teachers. Recall that the culminating event of the student teaching semester is an e-portfolio in which student teachers present their work before a small audience of their peers, cooperating teachers, field instructors, and professors. While it might seem obvious that the e-portfolio presentation is stressful for student teachers, what has received almost no attention is the way this experience places pressure on field instructors. Field instructors within the program have expressed a desire to see their student teachers make superior presentations as a way of bringing credibility to the work done during the semester. As we examined the implications of the e-portfolio presentations for our work as field

instructors, we discussed whether we felt our job was to promote good teaching or to find ways to promote student teacher buy-in with regard to the program's terms and goals. Note that these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Todd made the most explicit connections between the practice of the student teachers and the e-portfolio presentations. He acknowledged that his desire to explore the impact of the e-portfolio was very much tied to the pressure he felt to ensure that his student teachers were ready to present at the end and to the pressure that student teachers placed on him to prepare them for this experience. Yet even Todd's comments display a willingness on his part to do more than transmit the terminology of the program for the sake of claiming he taught them. It is apparent that Todd feels a tension between selling the program and the e-portfolio and promoting good teaching; the conflict led Todd to claim that he needed the following:

[N]eeded to tell them some things more than what they might need for the e-portfolio presentation... more than selling them, or telling them that they need to buy into these terms, or need to know exactly what they mean, or be prepared to talk about them during the portfolio presentations. (T.S. Hawley, personal communication, March 21, 2006)

The key, to Todd, lies in the ability of student teachers to be prepared to discuss the important terminology and the program's definitions of good teaching even as they look for ways of working within their specific teaching contexts to promote a vision of good teaching that may or may not include a strict interpretation of the key terms of the program.

Dave and Jason were much more explicit in their desire to promote good teaching within the specific contexts student teachers worked within as opposed to promoting only the program's terms. Dave bluntly stated that his interpretation of his role as a field instructor did not include "getting them to buy into our program" (D. Powell, personal communication, March 21, 2006). Instead, he expressed an interest in discovering what he could do to "make them better teachers," and added, "I would say that most of what I do is context driven" (D. Powell, personal communication, March 21, 2006). The self-study process allowed Dave to expand his thinking about good teaching and to explore in more complex ways how it is connected to his work as a field instructor. His final comments on the subject nicely describe how he is attempting to work within the tension created by the e-portfolio presentation to improve his work as a field instructor, as he explained the situation:

I do care that the student teachers internalize what we think to be best practices, but I guess I don't really care if they can tie it back to this program or not. I just want to see the student teacher develop as a teacher. I want to be out there not teaching them how to do the e-portfolio, not teaching them things they should have learned in 2450, or methods class, or whatever—I want to see what they have gotten out of that experience and I want to help them correct the problems that they have. I want to ask them what is going well and what is not going well and then I want to give them suggestions about what they might do about the things that are not going well. (D. Powell, personal communication, April 20, 2006)

Dave's words speak to his commitment of being a teacher, rather than just an agent of the program who comes out and simply evaluates student teachers' progress toward the program's goal of promoting active student engagement in worthwhile learning.

In the end, while the student teaching semester is often viewed as the most important experience to be had while learning to teach, little has been written about the potential of field instructors to use their observations to teach student teachers how to become better teachers. Our work highlights the need for more research on the type of teaching that field instructors engage in as they work in schools to improve the practice of novice teachers.

What are the challenges of promoting rationale-based practice? As mentioned earlier, the cornerstone of the teacher education program in which we work is the development of a teaching rationale. This rationale is an explicit statement of purpose for teaching social studies and is built around the powerful question of “what are you teaching social studies *for*?” While the rationale is developed during the first two semesters in the program, it finds its first practical application during the student teaching semester. The process of developing rationale-based practice is often a struggle for both student teachers and field instructors as the ideas that students use to drive the initial development of a rationale often are not critically examined before the student begins to student teach. It is not until the first observation that the student and the field instructor get a chance to discuss the connections, or disconnections, between what the student teacher claims to be teaching for and what the student teacher actually teaches. Bringing these two aspects together represents a struggle for field instructors interested in promoting the benefits of purposeful practice even during the student teaching semester.

Finding effective ways to support rationale-based practice presented each of us with our own set of pedagogical questions. In this section, we will recount the two main approaches we incorporated, as well as the challenges they entailed, as we attempted to promote rationale-based practice with our student teachers. The first approach was to begin with the rationale as the basis for all questioning. As discussed earlier, this is the approach taken by Todd as part of his routine for working with student teachers. The second approach was to help them develop a stronger sense of the beliefs underlying their rationale. This approach is most apparent in Jason’s examination of his practices regarding the rationale. We ultimately agreed that both approaches have merit and point to possible ways the program can begin to shift its focus in terms of promoting the importance of the rationale earlier in the program.

The data from our collaborative conferences dealing with promoting rationales reveals the different pedagogical approaches taken during the student teaching semester by each of us. Todd’s approach represented an explicit attempt to make connections between the rationale students had written prior to student teaching and their actual teaching practice. Discussion of these issues made up a considerable portion of the first post-observation conference for Todd and his student teachers. Jason has also taken the approach of asking student teachers to discuss how their practice matches up with their rationale as part of the first post-observation conference, but he discovered:

[M]ostly the student teachers are just embarrassed because it barely ever plays out in their teaching... maybe the best approach is to ask them about what they wrote on the pre-observation form right before the observation. Maybe this is an approach where you can at least point out some inconsistencies and get them thinking deeper about how things should match up. But it still doesn’t solve the problem that we have students work on a rationale all this time and they might be at the end with a big long document, most of which doesn’t mean enough to them where it will consciously play out in what they are doing in the classroom. (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, April 20, 2006)

This realization has led Jason to focus more on developing ways to help student teachers consider the underlying beliefs that guide the development of their rationales.

Initially, talking about the relatively innocuous idea of “active student engagement” usually gives Jason a foot-in-the-door to eventually discuss “the rationale underlying their decision making” during the first conference (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, April 17, 2006). This foot-in-the-door was his way of attempting to find an approach:

[M]ake student teachers believe what they say that they believe. I really think that a lot of them haven't reflected enough or made big enough connections—societal or otherwise—to even put together something that they do deem so important that they are going to have it play out in what they do in their classroom. I don't know. The only excuse I hear is that it is a developmental thing. Maybe they just haven't seen enough of the world or don't know enough about it to do it? For me, its like, “I would love if it played out in your practice but I would love even more if you could just get this core set of beliefs that you actually want to accomplish as a teacher that go beyond caring and liking kids.” (J.K. Ritter, personal communication, April 20, 2006)

Jason's struggle points to what all of us view as the most significant weakness in the program's approach to rationale development. Without exploring ways to critically examine the beliefs that underlie their rationales earlier in the program, students will continue to enter student teaching without the ability to make connections between what they are teaching for and the contextual issues raised by their student teaching placements.

Implications for our Teacher Education Program

Although we consider the findings of our ongoing research into our own practice as field instructors and teacher educators personally valuable, we also see significant professional benefits associated with our research. Most importantly, this research has afforded us the opportunity to critique the teacher education program we all work within and within which we all have so much invested. All three of us have been given extensive teaching responsibilities aside from our responsibilities as field instructors (although, perhaps significantly, we all began our work in the program by first being assigned as field instructors). Todd has the most teaching experience in the program among the three of us; he has taught the introductory course for secondary social studies majors twice: the seminar course that student teachers take during the student teaching semester and the department's methods course for undergraduate majors. Dave has taught introductory courses for both secondary and elementary majors as well as the program's secondary curriculum course, in which he taught a cohort of students who were concurrently enrolled in Todd's methods course. Jason will teach the secondary introductory course next semester and is the instructor of the student teaching seminar this semester. The three of us have also been invited to participate in program meetings throughout our tenure as graduate assistants in a conscious effort by some members of the department to include our voices and the voices of other graduate assistants in program-wide discussions.

Yet, despite the apparent proximity we have to program-related discourse and decision-making, we still have felt “out of the loop” more often than not. Some of this certainly is attributable to our status within the department as graduate students; no amount of integration

into program business will make us full-fledged members of the department. But, at the same time, our extensive experiences with the pre-service teachers served by the program place us in the unusual position of being able to offer constructive advice to the department's faculty regarding the direction of the program. To be sure, the tension that is engendered by this arrangement—we, along with our graduate student colleagues, have the most direct contact with students but very little control over how that contact is structured—found its way into this study and has motivated us to share a few thoughts on program reforms that may be worth pursuing. Just as the structure of the program has already shaped our own practices, and continues to do so, we hope to shape the practices of other field instructors and to have our research leave its mark on the program when we leave to pursue other opportunities.

In this spirit of dialogue between ourselves and the program, we would like to render a few suggestions that emerged from our work together and may be of use to the program going forward. First, our research indicates that more explicit discussions about the nature of field instruction are warranted. All three of us struggled to define our roles and have all offered differing (and sometimes conflicting) accounts of what we are supposed to be doing. Though Dave most explicitly talked about his work as being “contextually driven,” both Todd and Jason also expressed a desire to make their work meaningful to individual student teachers out “in the streets,” where the proverbial rubber meets the road.

What remains unclear is the extent to which each of us should position ourselves as “teacher”—as opposed to “mentor,” “supporter,” “evaluator,” or even “coach”—during field visits. Certainly, elements of all of these personas may be applicable within the context of field instruction, but the proper way to balance these responsibilities remains relatively unexplored, and none of us has a sense that one or more of these positions deserve primacy over others. Thus, we would like to encourage the people invested in our teacher education program, as well as people invested in like-minded programs, to consider engaging in discussions that seek to more clearly delineate the role that field instructors should play in teacher education. In order to do this effectively, we feel that program stakeholders should seek to provide rich and detailed descriptions and analyses of the many contexts within which field instructors work. Such contextualization holds the promise of bringing legitimacy to a role that has traditionally been fulfilled by disinterested faculty armed with checklists and benign platitudes that offer little in the way of constructive feedback to fledgling teachers.

We also have suggestions to make that are more specific to the operation of our particular program. Much work has been done to make rationale development a cornerstone of teacher education within our program, and we feel that great strides haven been taken toward the implementation of this goal. Nevertheless, additional work seems appropriate concerning the question of what role the rationale should play during student teaching. Specifically, we would like to see efforts made to help student teachers develop better understandings of the role their rationales can play in helping shape their practice *before* student teaching begins, as opposed to building this understanding in the course of the student teaching experience. The time spent in student teaching might be used more effectively if both student teachers and field instructors begin the experience on the “same page” as far as the rationale is concerned. Given that many student teachers are unable to do any actual teaching until this experience (they have significant contact hours prior to student teaching but often only observe classrooms during this time), every moment spent in front of the class is precious.

In order to build better understandings of the important role the rationale can play in developing effective teaching practice, we also believe that the program should place more

emphasis on critically examining the beliefs that underlie students' rationales long before student teaching begins. This might be accomplished by reorganizing the courses teaching candidates take or by simply providing feedback on the rationale at critical points during teacher preparation. As Todd lamented, students receive no constructive feedback on their original rationale statements when they are admitted to the program since those documents are used to determine admission to the program in the first place. This practice certainly deserves scrutiny.

Educational Importance of the Study

This study empowered each of the authors to use the collaborative environment we created to push our developing rationales for becoming social studies teacher educators. By highlighting the challenges that we experienced in carrying out our work with student teachers, this study contributes to understanding what it means to “become” a teacher educator, a hitherto relatively unexamined question (see Korthagen et al., 2005; Russell and Korthagen, 1995; Zeichner, 2005). This study also sheds light on the challenges of field instruction and reveals how collaborative self-study was an effective tool for helping us to “understand better how to approach problems in [our] own immediate contexts and teaching situations,” while also hopefully producing “a more generalizable kind of knowledge that teacher educators in their own settings can draw upon and adapt to their own teacher education settings” (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 11). Finally, as evidenced by our ability to develop a set of recommended adjustments to the teacher education program within which we are all working, it is our hope that this study contributes to a growing corpus of work that seeks to use self-study as a way to open up new avenues for change in teacher education (see Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Cole & Knowles, 1998a, 1998b; Dinkelman, 2003; Ham & Kane, 2004; Laboskey, 2004a, 2004b; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). We feel that this research offers exciting opportunities to explore an underexplored facet of teacher preparation. We look forward to continuing our conversations, and we encourage others to undertake similar conversations themselves.

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