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Benefits of literacy field experiences: Three views

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ABSTRACT

Three professors of literacy education reflected upon their varied field experiences with preservice teachers enrolled in their reading/language arts methods courses. After describing each field experience and discussing its impact on classroom teachers, elementary students, college students, and college professors, authors offer some general conclusions regarding literacy field experience.

“That child would not even pick up a pencil. You cannot imagine what it means to him to have that consistent one-on-one caring from another adult. Now look at him. He seems so much more engaged, so animated, with a light in his eyes!”

This comment was made by a classroom teacher who had observed the changes in one of her elementary students after he had worked with a preservice teacher in a literacy field experience.

IMPORTANCE OF FIELD EXPERIENCES

Few would argue about the importance of field experiences to enhance teacher education programs, particularly those that engage preservice teachers with students for sustained lengths of time. Linking these field experiences to actual methods courses is important. Too often field experiences that are not part of a specific course focus on passive observation of students, rather than connecting what is learned in methods courses to classroom practice with actual elementary students (Lanier and Little, 1986). Students whose field experiences are integrated into methods course content can see connections between what they are learning about teaching and how this is actually applied with students in the context of a real classroom (Lemlech and Kaplan, 1990). It is within the context of learning and practicing that preservice teachers actually construct their own knowledge about pedagogy.

Educators have begun to look at constructivist learning theories for guidance in preservice teacher programs. Research has brought into focus the discrepancies between what teacher educators “practice” and what they “preach.” Many methods courses are still predominated by lecture, some small group interactions, planning for a mythical class, and micro-teaching experiences with peers as students and/or a video camera to record the “perfect lesson,” or occasionally going to a school to try that lesson with a classroom of students the preservice teachers do not know and probably will not see again. But experiences that include sustained contact with children who depend on preservice teachers for some part of their learning provide those teachers with opportunities to construct their knowledge of teaching (Bufkin and Bryde, 1996; Kroll and LaBoskey, 1996; Marshall, 1996). Fosnot (1989) states that “The learner must have experiences with hypothesizing and predicting, manipulating objects, posing questions, researching answers, imagining, investigating, and inventing, in order for new constructions to be developed” (p. 20). It is only through active engagement with children that preservice teachers can hypothesize and predict (plan lessons); manipulate objects (launch those plans); pose questions and research answers (develop sustained inquiry-based relationships with children); and imagine, investigate, and invent (reflect on, discuss, consider, research resources, and create more plans). Thus, preservice teachers have the opportunity to construct their knowledge of a healthy teaching/learning culture.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY

We, the three authors of this article, seek ways to facilitate our university students’ learning in literacy methods courses. We all teach elementary literacy methods courses at the same university. Kathy and Wilma teach a six-hour reading/language arts methods block. Jarene teaches a three hour introductory reading course. We have each set up field experiences in these courses in different ways and at three different elementary schools. We initiated our inquiry to consider the results of our varied field experiences. We each felt comfortable with the format of our field experiences, but we are always interested in improving the experiences for all involved, particularly the students and teachers in the public schools. We sought information from interviews of the inservice teachers at the three different elementary schools as well as our own observations of children and conversations with preservice teachers. We chose to examine our field experiences and outcomes so that we could be more responsive to our classes, our students, and ultimately, elementary school students.

Our discussions and observations covered two semesters and two groups of preservice teachers with each professor. The classroom teachers and elementary students were the same each semester, so

reflections by classroom teachers encompassed a year of experience. Because of the difference in course requirements, six credit hours versus three credit hours, Jarene's preservice teachers were with elementary students for less sustained time than Kathy's and Wilma's classes. However, all of our experiences provided all of us different ideas and processes to consider.

This article shares our reflections upon our own teaching/learning practices based on the various components of information. We reflect as we ask our students to do. We are hopeful that other professors might similarly share reflection on their practices, thus improving the process of educating future teachers.

For the duration of the article, the following terms will be used: Preservice teachers refers to our undergraduate university students. Students refers to the elementary students with whom we worked. Teachers refers to the certified teachers in the schools that participated in our practicum experiences. College professors will refer to Kathy, Wilma, and Jarene, the three professors who participated and authored this study.

KATHY'S VIEW

Half of my preservice teachers worked with second graders while the other half worked with fifth graders. Preservice teachers wrote a note describing who they were and then the second and fifth-grade teachers gave these notes to their students. The students wrote letters about themselves to the preservice teachers the week before field experiences began so that the preservice teachers knew their names and some of their interests, and had a sample of their writing. My preservice teachers then worked with the elementary students for one hour weekly for 10 weeks applying many of the reading and writing strategies that we had talked about in class. In preparation for the sessions, preservice teachers were asked to write goals/objectives (linked to the school's reading or language arts goals) and plans for the day. After teaching, they were to write a reflection about what happened, what went well, what didn't go well, what the child had learned, what the preservice teacher had learned, and what they might do next time. I also worked with two students in the fifth grade. I modeled the types of lessons I was preparing with my own preservice teachers and also reflected on how I might improve instruction based upon what I learned from the elementary students.

Teachers

During and after the experience, I interviewed the teachers about their views of this type of field experience.

The fifth grade teacher was initially reluctant to have the preservice teachers in her classroom. She said, "I was anxious and nervous because of my class. They are so low-functioning in reading and

writing. I was happy but worried. I didn't want to scare any of your preservice teachers away. I was also nervous about the liability — I have violent, angry kids that behave worse for others than for me. But I wanted them to have the chance to work one-to-one with others and now I and they are anxious for each time. We look forward to it.”

The second grade teacher was excited about the one-to-one contact. “I was excited about my students' learning — reading fluently and proficiently with a partner in an interactive manner.”

During the process of field experience, I asked the classroom teacher about the value of this experience. The second grade teacher said, “The best teaching is not teaching at all. I sit back and observe my students. They are doing wonderful things. For an hour they are doing their thing and I learn from that. I don't want to watch too much and give the message that I don't trust them (the preservice teachers and the students). I get glimpses, though.”

The fifth grade teacher said, “I get new strategies and ideas for the classroom. I show my kids that I trust them with other adults. I have taught my kids responsibility. I have the confidence to have other adults come in and see the mess in my room. It lets me look at my kids through a slightly different lens. They need time to themselves without me around. They tell me later about their projects, that they are purposeful, and these projects give me ideas to use in class.”

Preservice Teachers

The preservice teachers learned about weekly planning and making instructional decisions based upon the individual students they were working with. Some of them asked me to help them find a way to motivate their students to read and write. My response was almost always, “What is this child interested in?” If the preservice teachers didn't know, I told them to find out. If they did, I asked them to find books on that topic and go from there.

One of my preservice teachers had a second-grade partner who was really interested in bacon. (apparently bacon was this child's favorite food and he talked about bacon non-stop to his preservice teacher.) I gave my preservice teacher a copy of the book *Don't Forget the Bacon* by Pat Hutchins to read to his student. He returned the book to me at the end of the semester and told me that they had read the book every time he worked with his student. It prompted them to work on reading fluency, as well as rhyming words (the story is about a boy who gets his grocery list mixed up because he forgets his original list and thinks of rhyming words for the listed words instead).

Another preservice teacher found out that her student was really interested in dogs. They spent much of the semester gathering information on dogs for a card game they made up using these cards.

Preservice teachers learned that they need to get to know their students and what topics interest them. They also learned to adapt their plans according to the needs of the children and their strengths

and weaknesses. Sometimes the preservice teachers worked in groups with their peers and other children so that they could have group discussions. But mostly they worked alone with their student, cultivating their own teaching styles and helping the children with their reading and writing.

I had asked my preservice teachers to do whatever reading and writing they were asking their students to do, too, because I believe in the power of modeling and demonstrating our own reading and writing strategies. Several of the preservice teachers didn't do this initially, but rather sat and watched the elementary student work. Each one of these preservice teachers wrote on their lesson reflections that they were going to do the work themselves the next time, too, because they felt the elementary students felt like they were being watched. They also said they got bored just sitting there and wanted to be more involved themselves.

At the end of the semester, several of the preservice teachers who worked with the fifth graders told me that they had originally wanted to work with young children, but that this experience had made them appreciate older children. They now wanted to student teach with older students.

Elementary Students

The elementary students were sad on our last day. Many of them gave their addresses to the preservice teachers in thank-you notes and cards. Some of them really connected with their preservice teacher. The second grade teacher said, "Chris (second grade student) has put lots of his writing done with his partner in his portfolio. He writes better with his partner than with me. His partner gives him confidence."

The elementary students were also exposed to different teaching ideas and styles. The second grade teacher said, "They see different teaching styles of adults. They see the process of education and fresh ideas. The one-to-one projects are much more beneficial to them."

The fifth grade teacher said, "The kids look forward to this time and will be sad when it's over. The kids willingly work on projects. They really care about the projects and want others to be proud of them. They are more interested in reading and seem to have more self-esteem."

College Professor

I worked with two students from the fifth grade throughout the semester. I think it is important that I model reading and writing strategies with elementary students for my own preservice teachers. I always learn from the experience and I enjoy working with the children. I often shared with my college class what I was doing with my students. For instance, both my fifth graders liked basketball so we read some informational books about basketball and then wrote our

own alphabet book of basketball. I showed my preservice teachers our finished product. Several of them then did alphabet books with their elementary students.

The fifth grade teacher had this to say about my working with two of her students: "I like that you work with kids in my classroom. Most of the time the two you work with struggle with reading and writing. Now they are held up, as if I trust them to work with the professor, as if they are one up on the other kids. They also get to know a college professor. They learn that you are real, that college is not a scary place, but rather a place made up of real people."

This fifth grade teacher has one year of experience and is currently pursuing her master's degree. I think she saw the value of my working with the children in another way too. She said, "You work with the kids and I like that. I've wanted to ask some of my professors, 'Have you been in a classroom lately?'" You cannot teach a teacher if you don't teach yourself. It gives you credibility. The idealism of college isn't applicable. You have to see what really works."

The limitation of my working with elementary students was that I had only limited time to observe my preservice teachers working with their elementary students. I was able to observe the preservice teachers working with fifth graders, since I was working with fifth graders also and we were all in the same classroom. However, I only observed the preservice teachers working with second graders when my fifth grade students were absent.

WILMA'S VIEW

Because I am concerned about preservice teachers learning to adapt lessons to diverse proficiencies and ethnic backgrounds, the field experience in my course had preservice teachers working with small groups of three to seven elementary students in literacy once a week for 12 weeks. Each session was about an hour long with a short time before for general questions and announcements and a time after for debriefing and discussion. Preservice teachers worked with intermediate students in the first six-week block and primary students in the second six-week block. All students in the elementary school were included in the field experience and students from self-contained resource and ESL rooms joined the groups for this hour each week. Thus, preservice teachers were required to plan for a small group of students with diverse strengths, needs and literacy proficiencies. Prior to the first session, preservice teachers and elementary students had exchanged letters once to get to know each other and to see each others' writing.

I required that preservice teachers use children's literature as the foundation for their lessons, choosing literature to fit the interests and proficiencies of their students. Sometimes that entailed having several different pieces of literature. Preservice teachers read aloud

and had students write each week —much of which was done in dialogue journals. Preservice teachers also developed their plans using at least one district language arts and/or reading goals/objective each week. The specific objective was up to preservice teachers' discretion and selected according to chosen literature and student needs. Two plans were handed in so that one could be left at the school for teachers to see as a type of accountability measure. A teacher-liaison collected, stored and made available those plans. Preservice teachers wrote anecdotal records about student progress and journal entries each week after the teaching session. Journal entries were informal reflections about the usefulness of their lessons and students' responses. I responded each week in these journals.

Teachers

The following reflections were gleaned from interviews with one intermediate resource teacher, one intermediate classroom teacher, one primary ESL teacher, and one primary classroom teacher.

Each of the teachers interviewed expressed enthusiasm upon first hearing about the preservice teachers coming to work with children in the school. However, they each expressed belief that other teachers in the school were not so eager. Prior experiences with field-experience students that usually involved very short contact time and a teaching agenda that fit the university curriculum rather than the elementary curriculum had left them concerned. After the first couple of weeks, all teachers were pleasantly surprised and were really excited about the program. Linda noted, "I can say that I think that having the UNO students here creates a little bit of excitement for us as a staff. It creates a real positive feeling on those days that we know that you are coming. Just in the morning, you know, people say, 'Oh yea, that's right, we have GROUP today.' and its not like, 'Oh, brother, we have GROUP today.'"

Whether or not classroom teachers gained directly from the experience depended on the individual teacher. One teacher suggested that the main benefit for teachers was an extra hour of planning time. The ESL teacher noted, "I imagine that most of us are filling a facilitator role or using it as a time for doing something that we want to do." However, each teacher mentioned ideas they'd picked up for literature to use and ways to use that literature. Dawn, behavior disorder resource teacher commented, "It adds variety to our reading program. It is also fun for the kids and something different. It breaks away from the monotonous. Gives us opportunities to see new things maybe that the teachers come up with. At one point, I noticed one sixth-grade teacher pulling several trade books from the shelf. She commented that, 'Seeing all the good books your students use reminded me that I have so many that I don't get around to using. I want to at least have them out for kids to read along with their basal lessons.'"

Teachers did come to the facilitator and ask to see the preservice teachers' lesson plans because, "One of the preservice teachers in my room used a great book and had a great lesson with it. I think that will fit in really well with ..." The facilitator planned to collate all plans into a notebook over the summer to have available for teachers as a resource the following year. She commented that teachers feel really swamped for time and, even though they'd like to use more literature, they can't find the time to locate good books to accompany objectives and/or interests. Thus, the lesson plans delivered each week are an aid to teachers.

Teachers also commented about the value of watching their students interact with other adults. They were able to take time to really observe individual students without worrying about the rest of the class. Linda, second-grade teacher, especially appreciated that opportunity. "I know I have stood and watched and, you know the boy I am worried about, and wonder about if he has ADHD, and I saw him doing things over and over again. It gave me a chance to see him interact with another adult to see if he behaves the same with her."

Preservice Teachers

Preservice teachers talked most about planning and using those plans with real children and then getting to know a group of students and planning according to their needs. The diversity of needs and strengths, even in small groups, provided some real-class planning. Finding appropriate learning activities and literature was a challenge. Preservice teachers learned that some of the best plans bomb, and teachers have to be flexible and change on the spot. I heard several preservice teachers say, "My lesson just wasn't working today, and I learned I could change it in my head and to on to do something better."

Preservice teachers learned to over-plan and be ready to use all or none of those plans while learning about timing — some activities took too long and they had to stop before they were done. Other times they ran out of things to do (especially with primary children) and needed to have useful time fillers. Linda, second grade teacher, noted "The preservice teachers, I think, see the value of planning your lesson and carrying it out. Hopefully, they are self-evaluating what they have done. That's valuable. I think that doing that in a small group is different from a one-to-one situation."

Preservice teachers often talked with each other and me about their students and their lessons. If something did or didn't help children learn, they shared and others learned. Although collaboration was informal, I encouraged students to share as much as possible. Dawn, resource teacher, suggested that peer support was one vital piece of the field experience in this format. She had experienced both the whole-class experience and going to schools on her own when she was in college. She supported our plan, "...the whole

attitudes of the (preservice) teachers. There is just, you have more confidence when the whole class is with you, I think. It just kind of helps. Even the kids, the kids have more confidence, and it is not just so structured. It is a lot more fun, I think for both sides. I remember just being petrified. Well, you just don't have that confidence, you know. Peer support is important for college students, too."

Sessions with intermediate students were planned around a theme, jointly chosen by elementary students and their preservice teacher. Preservice teachers learned that students who have some investment in the topic and their reading and writing activities are often motivated to participate. Preservice teachers also learned the value of writing with and responding in writing to their students. Many very reluctant writers wrote more and more as the sessions progressed — at least in part because their preservice teacher always wrote back. That was frequently the first thing students wanted to do — read what their preservice teacher had written to them. Preservice teachers also learned first-hand about diversity of proficiencies and emerging literacy stages. Experiences with two different grade levels also gave them some understanding of how needs vary with age, and many found they really enjoyed intermediate students, even though they once thought they would be "afraid" of older kids.

Preservice teachers had to learn to orchestrate learning in a group. Since the elementary students usually wanted to talk and share all their news from the week, their preservice teachers had to find ways to respectfully draw that to a close and get on with the lesson. Furthermore, some children did not cooperate all the time, so we had the chance to discuss methods for facilitating a positive learning environment — even on a small scale. Behaviors were occasionally a concern, too, and preservice teachers had the chance to learn first-hand about strategies for avoiding power struggles, discouraging "bossy" students, being firm with uncooperative students, continually inviting reluctant students to participate, helping students not play with supplies, and many, many other real-life decision-making opportunities. Linda, ESL teacher, saw changes in preservice teachers "management" of groups of students. "Towards the end, it [management] did get better. Because at first they would have way too much to do. Another person did not have quite enough to do. Some of the kids that have problems are just some of the kids that just plain old have problems so it wasn't the teacher's fault."

Elementary Students

Everyone mentioned that children were very enthused about seeing their preservice teachers. They got to read and hear good literature each week and be involved in small-group literacy activities. In a few instances, preservice teachers were able to connect with students that their regular teachers had not. A particularly moving incident involved a second grader whose teacher and ESL teacher thought

might be unable to read or write. He connected with his preservice teachers, chose to try a long part to read and succeeded. His teacher came along at the right time to observe this and wept for joy. She told me later that this student kept going from there. Some intermediate students had resisted writing for their classroom teachers and wrote quite a lot for their preservice teachers. In another instance, a fifth grader seemed to want to impress his preservice teacher with his reading and proceeded to read a couple of books during that six weeks to share. Though he didn't continue at quite that same rate, his teacher tells us he did continue to read and consider himself a reader — a change in attitude.

Because of the small group setting, some students, particularly those from a Behavior Disorder resource room, were successful working with peers in ways they had not been for some time. Very diverse groups of students worked together, came to really like another adult, and grew in literacy skills at the same time. Leslie, primary ESL teacher, noticed that her students "are more attentive when they listen to stories. They are more open towards new people; they don't hang on to me as much." Even the social was important. Dawn said, "I think the number one thing for my students would have to be the social. They just really enjoy meeting their teachers and seeing them every week, getting together with other classmates in the school that they aren't normally interacting with."

College Professor

Since the preservice teachers and their groups were spread over at least half of the school building, I chose not to teach a small group, but went from room to room to observe. Some of the time I had a graduate assistant come with me and observe as well. She then gave her comments, suggestions, and ideas, as well as I did. Often when I was roaming into the different rooms, I stopped to talk with teachers. I made sure they saw me as a team player and one who valued their expertise and worked to help them realize I am also a teacher who cares a great deal about children. I'm fully aware that many public school teachers are skeptical of professors' understanding their jobs, so one important gain for me was trust from teachers. By being highly visible, I was able to move into discussions and hear some of their concerns and suggestions. I also had the opportunity to notice a variety of activities that children responded to with positive attitudes and those that seemed to go nowhere. Nancy (primary teacher) weighed the possibility of my working directly with students against the way I did it and said she preferred this because she didn't believe preservice teachers would get to see me model anyway ...they were busy with their own groups. She further commented that "I appreciate when you come in and I can say to you, 'Now I am wondering about that group over there,' or 'this is what I am noticing here or

there.” Since there was not time to talk with the preservice teachers, I became the messenger between the two groups.

Terry, intermediate teacher and liaison, seemed to believe the most important piece for professors was to see that teachers have concerns beyond theories and lesson plans. “Professors need to be in the classroom and know what is important to teachers — what they are worried about. Professors need to be aware of the types of requirements and restrictions that teachers need to work around.” She and others expressed frustration about the unreal demands in college for writing the perfect plan or making a huge project that is very unrealistic for “the real world.” “Teaching is the smallest part of what I do every day,” Terry said. And she felt she was made to believe that she had to do what she planned in college. Leslie felt she had been humiliated in college and not respected. She felt this program, with the professor right there with preservice teachers, indicated a greater level of respect than she had experienced and she was glad.

Being spread over half the building was also a part of the difficulty. Not every preservice teacher was having a marvelous time each session, and the logistics made it hard for me to spend enough time observing to be able to advise as much as I would like. I also found that when teachers wanted to talk, it took time away from my observations. I’m also trying to find ways to give more effective feedback to preservice teachers about their teaching. I felt that was a gap in this experience that I hope to fill in the future.

JARENE’S VIEW

Each of 26 preservice teachers taking an introduction to reading course was assigned to work with one second grade student from one classroom in a public elementary school. Since there were only 23 second graders and 26 preservice teachers, ESL students came to the second grade classroom during each of the preservice teacher’s visits to receive one-on-one reading instruction from the three extra preservice teachers. Reading instruction occurred during six one-hour, once-a-week visits. Preservice teachers prepared reading and writing lessons which focused primarily on individual needs of each second grade student. The lessons also incorporated the school’s curriculum as outlined by the classroom teacher. Before the visits began, letters were exchanged between second grade students and preservice teachers as each participant wrote an introduction accompanied by a computer-generated photograph. Preservice teachers used the second grade writing samples to make initial assessment about reading and writing needs for the first instructional visits. In addition, the classroom teacher provided information on the story and reading skills she was presenting that week. These classroom skills were reinforced during the instructional visits when they coincided with the needs of individual second graders.

There were four types of written feedback. First, the preservice teachers' lesson plans were checked and approved with written feedback from the university professor before each classroom visit. Second, each preservice teacher wrote an assessment of student performance and learning after each lesson directed for the classroom teacher in an assessment notebook. The classroom teacher read and responded in writing to each assessment and the assessment notebooks were returned to the preservice teachers in time to use the feedback to prepare the next lesson. Third, the second graders wrote and drew in a writing notebook the last 10-15 minutes of each visit. Preservice teachers collected these writing notebooks, used the product for assessment to guide the next lesson plan, and responded in writing to each second grader's entry. Preservice teachers and elementary studies discussed the writing notebooks along with the feedback during each visit. Fourth, the preservice teachers wrote reflections about their own teaching: about what happened; what went well; what didn't go well; what they had learned; and what they might do next time.

Teachers

The following information was gleaned from my participation in the experience, observations of preservice teachers and second graders, and an interview with the second grade classroom teacher.

The second grade classroom teacher had never collaborated with a university professor before in this manner and although hesitant at first, was pleased with the results. "I was hesitant because I didn't want to waste any time with poorly prepared lessons and I was worried about the noise. However, I could sense when you asked for my reading objectives and sent me an agenda of the proposed visits that things were organized. After that first visit, I saw that every student was engaged in learning and the noise was not a problem. I tell everybody how wonderful it worked." She also said she felt like she had a real part in preparing preservice teachers. After the six visits, she even came to the university campus and presented for the first time to preservice teachers on ways she taught reading. She asked for more university collaborative visits. She said she told other elementary teachers how well the project worked. She asked for articles and new children's books that she could use in her classroom. She said she got ideas and new strategies and games to use with her second graders by watching the preservice teachers teach as she walked around the room during their visits.

Elementary Students

The classroom teacher mentioned unexpected benefits she saw her second graders receiving. "That child wouldn't even pick up a pencil. You can't imagine what it means to him to have that consistent one-on-one caring from another adult... I mean if you knew what his experience has been, there is no father at home and his

mother is in jail for drugs... Now look at him. He seems so much more engaged, so animated with a light in his eyes.”

She also said that her second graders were sad to see the visits come to an end. “At the beginning, they thought the six weeks sounded like such a long time, and now it’s suddenly over. My students don’t want to miss school because they know their college student is coming... They talk all through the week about ‘That’s the day the college students come.’”

The second graders were engaged in one-on-one reading and writing and remembered what was discussed during the lessons. “During the week, one of my students will say, ‘That’s what we did with my preservice teacher,’ or ‘My preservice teacher told me that.’” The second graders were eager and excited about the reading and read books during the week that they had read with the preservice teachers.

Preservice Teachers

Preservice teachers said that the preparation and delivery of the six instructional visits about reading and writing was the best part of the course. They also said they learned a great deal from the guest presentation from the classroom teacher after the six visits. It was relevant having just spent so much time teaching in that teacher’s room, as well as having observed the teacher’s teaching for 10 minutes before the start of each instructional session. Preservice teachers were disappointed when the visits came to an end after establishing a bond with each of their elementary students. Preservice teachers’ lesson plans became more specialized in designing instruction to meet individual students’ needs. They said they were much more aware of the wide variety of abilities and reading and writing development all in one classroom, even in second grade, and that there really was no such thing as a “second grade level.” Preservice teachers began to think of ways to design and manage differentiated instruction for an entire classroom of individual students. They said they really enjoyed and benefited from the classroom teacher’s regular written feedback and that they realized the importance of their regular, authentic feedback to the second graders in the writing notebooks. Preservice teachers began to consult directly with the classroom teacher in informal conferences after each instructional visit and said they began to gain confidence in their own instructional decisions. In addition, preservice teachers’ confidence in their own abilities to make professional decisions increased as they were required to include connections or ideas they’d gained from professional readings and in reflecting about their own teaching.

College Professor

I gained confidence that collaborative teaching with classroom teachers is a very effective way to engage in the preparation of

preservice teachers. I learned more about the value of written ongoing assessment and feedback loops, about the learning process between all of the participants, namely elementary students, preservice teachers, classroom teachers and university professors. I learned how to be more sensitive to and how to address others' concerns, such as incorporating the needs of the classroom teacher and the school culture (using name tags and being on time, prepared and quiet in the halls, asking permission, writing notes to parents, letting the school secretary know) into the project and specific lesson plans.

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Although each one of us set up the field experiences in different ways, there was overlap in many of the benefits. All three of us mentioned the importance of the elementary students and the college students writing to one another before the face-to-face interaction actually began. By reading a letter, preservice teachers learned about their prospective students and had some basis from which to do initial planning. They also benefited from planning with specific students' strengths and weaknesses in mind.

In all instances, we mentioned that the teachers learned some strategies and ideas from our preservice teachers. They saw it as an opportunity to gain information and try different books with children as well.

Each of us noted that at least one elementary student made a connection with the preservice teachers that enhanced his/her attitudes about reading and writing. Elementary students felt special because they were working with an adult who cared about them and wanted them to become better writers and readers.

The preservice teachers seemed to benefit from the added reflection and the input from their peers as they planned and carried out their lessons. They had a sounding board to go to if things weren't going well. They had other people to turn to for help beyond just the professor. This community spirit really enhanced the field experience for all of us. Telling preservice teachers to be reflective is one thing; encouraging and enabling them to be reflective is preferable.

Finally, we all noted that the teachers trusted us and respected us for bringing our preservice teachers to their schools. The relationship between teachers and professors can be an uncomfortable one, but in all three cases we felt as if we were all partners in enhancing learning, for our preservice teachers as well as the elementary students. We have all been asked to continue the field experiences at these three different schools, which is a tribute to the partnership that has been established between a university and a local school district.

There were some problems associated with the field experiences by each one of us. Kathy struggled with juggling her own tutoring of elementary students and observing her preservice teachers as they

worked with children. Wilma found it difficult to get the whole school involved in the inclusion of her preservice teachers in each classroom. Jarene found it challenging to gain entry into her school, as this school had not provided prior field experiences for preservice teachers. All three of us gave up class time so that we could be at the elementary schools during the time that our college class was scheduled to meet. Some would argue that we lost valuable "content" time through this practice. That may be true, but we think that the benefits of real life experiences for our preservice teachers built a context for what we were each teaching in our literacy classes.

We continue to alter our field experiences as we seek to improve our teacher education program. Even though we each set up our field experiences differently, we agree on some important tenets of field experience. First, we think that being reflective about this process is an important part of improving the product. Secondly, we think the notion of practicing what we preach is particularly important for not only preservice teachers to see, but also classroom teachers. And finally, we think that preservice teachers are more apt to remember their field experiences and learn from them when they are allowed to construct their own learning in a realistic classroom setting.

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