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READING: THE CONFERENCES

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The Teacher as Professional
International Reading Association 38th Annual Meeting
San Antonio Texas — April 26-30, 1993

The theme of this issue of *Reading Horizons* is exemplary practice, and as I recall several of the sessions from the annual conference of the International Reading Association it becomes clear how central the concept of teacher as professional is to exemplary practice. One session in particular — Teacher Preparation and Staff Development: Lessons from New Zealand — presented by Debra Elliot and colleagues provided some food for thought in considering the teacher as professional. In discussing current models of student teaching, which is of course a critical component to the development of the teacher as professional, Stephanie Steffey from San Jose State University prompted our thinking through a series of questions about our own teacher preparation experience. Questions included the following: 1) Did we begin to view the teacher as risk-taker, decision-maker, facilitator and observer, or were we trained as technicians? 2) Did we have the chance in our preparation programs to see ourselves as readers and writers, as mathematicians, as social scientists? 3) Were our classes student-centered or teacher-directed? 4) Was there a focus on teacher autonomy or did we as students participate in a shared, negotiated curriculum? 5) Did we engage in the development of a theory about how children learn? 6) Did we experience congruence between teacher education and what is happening outside the university in K-12 education? 6) Did we begin to develop the concept in ourselves of teacher as researcher?

For those of us connected with teacher preparation, reflection upon our own experience serves to guide our own practice as we guide the developing practice of preservice teachers. It struck me as I pondered these questions, am I always modeling in my undergraduate classes those elements of practice that I am espousing? Could I characterize my classes as teacher directed or student centered? I am convinced that teacher educators must continually wrestle with the alignment of our own espoused theories and practice as we bring teacher preparation and the reality of K-12 education into closer alignment. Jan Duncan, an educator from New Zealand, expanded upon this notion of the importance of teachers developing a theory which will then guide their practice. Using the example of literacy education in New Zealand, Duncan suggests that there is a unifying theory across that country of how children's literacy development should be supported in the classroom. This unifying theory drives all of practice. The child is the starting point, the resources are available in the classroom (and at home) for the children to use, and the teacher is the important link between the child and the resource. This model is in contrast with the basal or literature model where the resources, or materials, drive the curriculum. The needs of the child are secondary in that model — when in fact, the needs of the child should be primary.

“What we have to do is to help teachers develop theories and understandings in their heads to know what drives their practice.”

--Jan Duncan, International Reading Association Annual Conference, April 26-30, 1993.

What does this have to say about the teacher as professional? As I reflect upon this discussion of models of teacher preparation and staff development, it becomes clear to me that teachers must see themselves as the decision-maker in the classroom. Teachers must be about the hard work of uncovering their own theories, refining those theories as we expand the knowledge base, and translating that into appropriate changes in practice. Those of us involved in teacher education can model this process as well as encourage and support its development in our students.