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FIELD BASED TEACHER EDUCATION PROMISE OR PROBLEM

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One of the most widely advocated recommendations for improving the teaching of methods courses is to put them in an elementary school setting. This should help to ensure that practice is related to theory. Although this is very desirable some questions arise concerning the organization and implementation of such a program. These questions center around three major areas:

- 1) cooperating teachers,
- 2) cooperating schools, and
- 3) evaluating effectiveness of students prepared in this way.

Cooperating Schools

First let's consider the part played by the participating elementary school. A laboratory school is one possibility. One of the major criticisms made concerning a laboratory school is the fact that the pupil population is not typical of that which students will find in their actual teaching positions. Usually the pupils attending a laboratory school are above average in ability, so pre-service students do not get a true picture of an elementary school classroom. In turn, then, even though they will have practice tied in with theory, that practice will not be of great assistance when the student takes charge of his own classroom in a quite different environment.

A college or university lacking a laboratory school must seek assistance from one of the public schools in the community. This can present some major problems. First of all, both administrators and faculty members in the elementary school have to be willing to cooperate in such a venture. They are partners with the college or university in preparing these students for future teaching. Just as a laboratory school's population may be above average in ability, a public school, depending on its location may have an above average, average, or below average in ability population. In many city school systems the number of schools with children who function much below grade level placement is great. Is it desirable to send our students into these schools which present some of the greatest difficulties as well as the greatest challenges for teachers? Would it be better to expose them to more than one type of school so that they would become aware of existing differences? Would adjustment to their first teaching positions be

achieved more readily if they had opportunities to work in different schools?

Cooperating Teachers

The cooperating teachers who staff these schools may vary widely in educational background, experience, teaching effectiveness, and willingness to cooperate in the preparation of teachers. It would be beneficial if it were possible to select schools in which there were only teachers who wished to participate in the program, and all those teachers were effective. Unfortunately there is no school in which all teachers can be classified as effective if for no other reason than the fact that there is no clear cut definition of what makes an effective teacher. Should the student be exposed to both effective and ineffective teachers? Would there be some benefit in seeing ineffective practices in operation?

Teachers in cooperating schools should be given a voice in whether or not they wish to participate in the pre-service preparation of teachers. This is not something which can be imposed from administrative level. In some cases teachers in cooperating schools are not compensated in any way for the contribution they make. It is true that there may be some satisfaction in seeing a job well done, but how many of us are willing to work solely for satisfaction?

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Students in a Field Based Program

Of the few studies which have been conducted to weigh the merits of the field-based program as opposed to a university-based one, not all have shown the field-based situation to be superior.

(Giannangelo, 1973) compared two approaches of teaching an undergraduate social studies methods course for elementary teachers. One group had pre-student teaching involvement with pupils in the social studies area while enrolled in a social studies methods course. A second group had no pre-student teaching involvement with pupils while enrolled in the social studies methods course. A control group had no social studies instruction or student teaching experience. The groups were compared in two areas: knowledge pertaining to the teaching of social studies and teaching proficiency in social studies during student teaching.

The students who completed the methods course had greater knowledge pertaining to teaching social studies than the students who did not take the course. Those students who spent time in the classrooms of elementary schools while taking the course had less knowledge pertaining to the teaching of social studies than students who spent no time in elementary classrooms. Finally there was no difference in the teaching proficiency of the students regardless of whether or not they had spent time working in elementary classrooms while taking the methods course.

It would seem that it is important for all students to take a social studies methods course. However, in this case, the field-based situation did not produce any better teachers and did seem to be somewhat less desirable as far as mastery of knowledge concerning teaching of social studies.

A recent study (Gray, 1973) had as its purpose the determination of the relative merits of preparing elementary reading teachers in a field-based program as contrasted with the merits of a university-based program. The pre-service students were asked to teach four reading lessons which they had developed from a list of four objectives supplied by their methods instructor. These lessons were taught during the last week of the semester. Pre and post tests were administered by the investigator and graduate students from the university.

The achievement of the pupils receiving instruction from the field-based group was no better than the achievement of pupils receiving instruction from the university-based group. In addition according to a specified form which was provided for writing lesson plans the university-based group wrote the better plans (those which made use of a wider variety of suitable materials and more varied learning experiences). A possible explanation for this may be due to the fact that the exposure to cooperating teachers influenced the plans of the field-based group. Most practicing teachers do not write very detailed plans, and most do not contain a statement of objectives. If the field-based students were exposed to teachers who relied rather heavily on the use of textbooks for all lessons, it is likely these students would adopt some of these practices. This would help to explain the lack of originality on their part.

Does this mean that classroom observation adversely affects the writing of lesson plans? Does it mean that writing lesson plans is unimportant as the end results of the lessons taught by both groups were not significantly different? Does it mean the opportunity to observe in elementary classrooms is not of benefit to pre-service students? If, indeed, there is no difference in the teaching effectiveness of the field-based and university-based groups maybe some rethinking should be done concerning the field-based programs being established in many colleges and universities.

A third study (Lahnston, Lapp, Rezba, and Willcutt, 1974) done at Boston University had as its purpose determining the effect of learning site on selected teacher training variables. Data was obtained in each of these domains to determine the effect of learning site on:

- 1) The attitude of the interns to the pre-service elementary teacher preparation block program and to teaching in general.
- 2) The attainment of cognitive skills in the teaching of science, reading-language arts, and social studies by the interns.
- 3) The use of teacher skills in the classroom by the interns.
- 4) The cognitive growth of pupils when instructed on specific tasks by interns (p. 5).

Number 4 of the above domains is similar to that used in the two previous studies discussed, so findings from that area will be presented. In this study there was significantly greater gain on the post test mean scores of the pupils taught by the field-based interns. Of the three studies discussed this is the only one in which the field based students exceeded the university-based students in teaching performance.

Summary

Many questions have been raised relating to the three areas listed at the beginning of this paper, and the answers to all of them are not immediately available. If, however, field-based programs are employed to provide pre-service training for our future teachers, the answers to these questions should be found and soon. The success or failure of these programs depends heavily on doing just that.

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