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Sheryl Boris-Schacter

Susan Merrifield

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A College's Diversity Initiative Finds Its Way into Student Teachers' Lesson Plans

Sheryl Boris-Schacter and Susan Merrifield

Background

Lesley College is a small institution in Cambridge, Massachusetts that has an undergraduate school for women and a larger co-educational graduate school. Central to its mission is the preparation of students for careers in teaching. Two years ago the College began revamping its certification programs to meet new state regulations. This process of curriculum overhaul led the faculty to raise questions regarding the connection between coursework and practice. One such question was to what extent our students, who are academically typical of education majors nationwide,¹ relied upon their Lesley coursework to help them conceptualize curriculum and plan instructional strategies.

In order to address that question, we designed a research project that asked: "How does coursework, fieldwork, and personal experience combine to influence student teachers' lesson plan development?" We framed the question along these parameters because they are the ones most frequently cited in the literature as being influential to practice (See for example: Bradley, 1991; La Barea, 1992; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). We chose lesson plans as the vehicle for the inquiry because they provided an authentic and concrete end-product to pedagogical thinking. In other words, respondents needed to actually engage in the activity of planning to teach in order to participate in the study.

We recognized, as Tyson (1991) did, that talking about teaching is not the same as teaching. However, also like Tyson, we believed that getting a window into novice teacher thinking can be a valuable resource for determining course content for teacher education programs. Consequently, our study builds upon the teacher knowledge/teacher thinking literature (See for example: Dewey, 1933; Lowyck, 1986; Shulman, 1986; Shulman, 1987; Newmann, 1991; Onosko, 1992), as well as the work on pedagogical content knowledge (See for example: Marks, 1990; Grossman, 1990). Additionally, our research was informed by what we call expert-novice studies in which it is argued that teacher thinking and professional reflection evolve over time (See for example: Tyson, 1991; Russell and Munby, 1990; Huling-Austin, 1992; Tremmel, 1993).

It is altogether reasonable to assume that veteran practitioners would have heightened abilities to reflect upon teaching as they increase their years of teaching practice. It is also reasonable to assume that novices are powerfully influenced by their early memories of

conventional teachers and teaching. In fact, Kennedy observed that these memories are so central to novice thinking that they compete with the newer strategies taught in teacher education programs "... the conventional images of teaching that derive from childhood experiences makes it very difficult to alter teaching practices and explains in part why teaching has remained so constant over so many decades of reform efforts" (1991). Although some researchers, such as Grossman (1990), are persuasive regarding the advantages of pedagogical coursework in the preparation of teachers, it was not entirely clear how those advantages influenced undergraduates such as ours in their thinking about teaching.

We pursued this research because we believe that the curriculum at our institution provides students with the appropriate content and experiences to be effective teachers in a wide range of communities; yet, we are not quite sure how students apply this knowledge when they have responsibility for lesson plan development. We wondered if they could articulate their ideas, the rationale for them, and the influences upon them. We considered these abilities central to the enterprise of teaching, whether one calls it "reflective practice," "mindfulness," or "paying attention" (Tremmel, 1993). Like many before us, we were motivated by questions impacting our professional role as teacher educators, most globally expressed as, "Are our courses and supervised experiences preparing students to be effective practitioners?"

Methodology

In an effort to better understand where student teachers' ideas about teaching come from, we began a pilot study of Lesley undergraduates completing student teaching in grades 4-8. During January 1993, we initiated our inquiry with an exploration of how volunteers talked about the process of creating a lesson based upon content from a single fifth grade Social Studies text. Our selection of this textbook chapter on immigration provided all respondents with an identically organized content base and avoided the possible distorting anxiety that a math/science textbook might evoke in young women (Bailey, 1992). Moreover, we selected a regionally popular textbook and an assignment typically given to student teachers, because it was not our intention to make the task too difficult or foreign. In fact, we wanted to replicate a familiar process that would have a greater likelihood of promoting confidence and professional reflection.

We solicited our volunteers from the student teaching seminars toward the end of their practicum experience. The timing allowed for student teachers' thinking to be significantly influenced by their cooperating practitioner as well as by professors with whom they were still studying or at least seeing around campus. The respondents agreed to complete short surveys and write lessons plans within three days of interview appointments. The survey posed demographic questions addressing possible confounding data that could impact student thinking about the content area:

What certificate (s) program are you in?

How many credits have you completed in education?

How many credits have you earned in history? What courses have you taken?

How many credits have you earned in Social Studies Methods?

Is this your first or second student teaching placement? (2)

During the interview appointment, which lasted between twenty and fifty-five minutes, students were asked questions regarding their lesson and their interpretation of the chapter:

What was the chapter, "A Land of Immigrants," about?

What was the main idea?

What did you know about immigration before you read the chapter? Where did you learn this? Did you learn anything new?

Did the chapter support or contradict your views of immigration? How do you think this affected your lesson plan?

When you finished reading the chapter and sat down to think about how you would teach the material, how did you start designing the lesson?

Where did your ideas about the format of the lesson come from?

Who did you imagine you were developing this lesson for? Would you have made any changes in the lesson if you were teaching a different population?

Is there anything else about your developing this lesson that you would like to add?

We worked from taped interviews and written fieldnotes to develop codes and identify trends that grew from the data and helped us to answer the research question. This approach offered a method for gathering complex data from a few students for the purpose of illuminating the connections between novice teacher thinking and lesson plan development. Clearly, such a methodology does not permit generalization beyond the sample group. However, as is true with other carefully designed and implemented qualitative research, we willingly traded breadth for depth. Moreover, we were not interested in investigating the degree of congruence between what students reported and what was actually written on their lessons. Rather, we focused our investigation on student thinking about their lessons and the self-reported sources of influence upon that thinking.

We replicated our 1993 pilot with a second set of Lesley student volunteers interviewed exactly one year later in January 1994. The time of year and point in their student teaching placement, venue, methodology, book chapter, interviewers, and questions were identical to those of the pilot. We decided to repeat the process one year later to increase

the sample size so that we could have greater confidence in our findings. Interestingly, the number of students in 1993 and 1994 who volunteered and followed-through on their commitment to participate was the same. Each year we had eight white women completing the survey, designing the lessons, and participating in the individual interviews. Only one of the sixteen respondents was non-traditional age. (3)

What we hoped to uncover was how students moved from textbook chapter to lesson plan and how they talked about their conceptualization of curriculum development. Additionally, we were interested in finding out how students interpreted the textbook and decided between teaching strategies, and to what extent college coursework influenced the processes of interpretation and decision-making.

Findings

The literature suggests that the influence of school culture is so significant to a teacher's training that college coursework is virtually "erased" when students entered the field (Bradley, 1991). Similarly, others argue that formal academic training was not nearly as influential in student teachers' practice as was their personal recollection of their own experience as K-12 students (La Barea, 1992; Holt-Reynolds 1992). However, findings from our study indicated that coursework does have a profound influence on how these student teachers think about practice. It is important to note that our student sample consisted of predominately high achieving students. This was not surprising, given that essentially we asked student volunteers to demonstrate competency in lesson plan development to Education faculty from their college. What was surprising was that these high achieving students spoke often about the influence of Education coursework upon their lesson plan development, a group that the 1986 Holmes report found to be especially resistant to the content of pedagogical coursework (Grossman, 1990). Therefore, these findings have the potential to have important implications for our Education program.

In reviewing the first set of data, we realized that our information about how students think about lesson planning could be broken into four categories: the intellectual process involved in creating lesson plan ideas, such as brainstorming and marginal notes; instructional strategies for the lesson, such as journal writing, family trees, interviews, research, discussion and additional reading; the lesson format, the order in which strategies are presented; and background knowledge informing the content of the lesson. Both the ideas for the lesson and the lesson plan format came almost exclusively from college coursework, especially Education courses. However, other courses were also named as being influential in that the skills, such as problem- solving and brainstorming acquired in content areas, were directly transferable to their teaching of a social studies lesson. For example, a Mathematics major explained how her training impacted the way she devised the lesson: "The problem solving I learned was indirectly beneficial. It taught me not to give up when you write a lesson. You have to think about all the students. You

have to know the materials, then translate it so that students can learn."

Another Mathematics major applied a different aspect of the content area training to pedagogy: "A lot of my thinking comes from working as a Math/Science teacher. I focus on the concepts, not the mechanics." Although respondents indicated that college coursework in history and sociology played a role in their approach to the content of the chapter, students' background knowledge of issues pertaining to immigration came primarily from pre-college coursework and family stories and experiences. Typically, students reported that they "knew a lot about Ellis Island...I don't really remember learning much in school about immigration, but I do remember asking my grandmother and other family members how they got here."

When students talk about their lessons, their thinking falls into roughly two categories that we call "developmental" and "disconnected." Students who think developmentally about the process of lesson planning indicate an awareness of the difficulties inherent in creating an isolated lesson from a single chapter separate from a larger curricular context. As one student explained when she discussed the limits of our assignment, "I'm looking in my head to write a unit . . . so I started with an introduction lesson." Another described her lesson as "a pre-activity to the chapter." Other students that we labeled as developmental recognized that curriculum considerations include the long view over the course of a semester or a year. For example, one respondent explained: "I thought I could do this part of the lesson (sharing personal stories) in May or June, but I think it would be too scary to do in November."

By contrast, the disconnected thinkers tended to report that their lesson was based primarily on an idea that they liked personally. For instance, one student said: "Well, I guess my lessons always relate to my personal experience because I didn't have a good time in school." Interviews with such students provided little indication that their lessons might be part of a larger curriculum with specific academic goals and a long range view. It is interesting to note that the "disconnected thinkers" were just as likely as the "developmental thinkers" to use jargon-laden language from coursework when talking about their lesson. However, the disconnected group did not apply these concepts in a meaningful way. For example, one such student created a lesson composed of free writing and a family tree. When asked to explain the relationship between these activities, she explained that she was "mixing it up." Here we see that vocabulary acquired through coursework appeared to be little more than a "bag of tricks," the implication being that one instructional activity can easily substitute for another. A different disconnected respondent described the rationale driving her lesson as "... a bunch of techniques I put together."

The 1994 interviews confirmed the findings of the 1993 set. Again, we saw that undergraduate coursework, particularly Education courses, played a significant role in the process of lesson plan development. However, the developmental/ disconnected

distinction seemed less applicable to this data set as all students interviewed approached the assignment developmentally. In fact, this group expanded our notion of developmental understanding to include a framework of critique. The majority of students, without having any question to prompt them, criticized the text selection for lacking a fully developed multicultural perspective. Importantly, not a single respondent from the earlier group made such an observation, regardless of whether their thinking was developmental or disconnected.

It seemed to us that because the students had the ability to analyze the text as limited in terms of its cultural understanding, they acquired a lens through which to consider the lesson reflectively.

This reflection caused them to think developmentally about the process of lesson planning. One respondent criticized the chapter for its lack of specific and inclusive voices that would give students a better understanding of the immigrant experience: "I thought there was this vagueness in the chapter that I wanted to deal with...I wanted it to be more meaningful to the students..." Another interviewee commented about how the textbooks were still presenting children with unrealistic images of people and accounts of historical events: "People love their country of origin. I wish there was more of that in the text. It didn't give enough credit to home countries. America was too positively portrayed." We did not have any such statements in the 1993 interviews.

Our finding that the majority of student teachers interviewed in 1994 criticized the text selection for its limited cultural perspective stands in sharp contrast to the 1993 set in which none of the students indicated similar concerns. In analyzing our data, we have found that there really is only one reasonable explanation for this new finding. We believe that the source of the student teacher thinking about multicultural issues is Lesley College's Diversity Initiative. Sponsored by a contribution from a generous donor concerned about multicultural education for future teachers, this initiative began in the summer of 1993 with the multicultural curriculum project. Over 50 faculty participated in this project, either developing new courses with a multicultural perspective or redesigning old courses to make them more inclusive. While few of the students interviewed had actually taken any of these new courses, all of the students took a course or had significant contact with a professor involved in this curriculum initiative. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that students interviewed in 1994 had been influenced by the work of the undergraduate faculty who are presently engaged with the topic of multicultural education. The fact that this particular student population is unusually influenced by college coursework also underscores the role that the diversity initiative can play at this institution.

Lastly, as Education faculty, we were pleased to discover that the study itself served as an intervention. Students practiced lesson planning without the pressure of implementation but with the time for contemplation and revision. This was accomplished partially

because the design forced students to reflect upon practice. Moreover, a less obvious intervention occurred when the female students viewed the investigators not only as professors at the College, but also as women scholars. Students made remarks indicating their interest in research as an arena not contemplated before, but one that suddenly held possibilities for their own futures.

Implications

Each of the study findings holds implications for practice. For instance, it is central to our work to have discovered that pedagogical coursework does indeed influence student teacher thinking at our institution. After a decade of negative public relations regarding the relative worth of such courses to the education of teachers, this finding should boost morale and validate the efforts of Education faculty.

Given that the research design we employed here rendered a useful way to think about novice approaches to lesson planning, it seems to us that the same design could be used as a performance assessment with student teachers to determine whether they are developmental or disconnected in their thinking about teaching. Perhaps a goal would be for students to demonstrate the ability to place a single lesson in a larger curricular context. We view this context along two continua--the one that follows practice from Monday morning to Friday afternoon, and the one that goes from September to June.

The multicultural awareness exhibited in the second set of interviews but not in the first implies that it does make a difference to students when an academic institution has a vision and an agenda when it supports that vision with resources. The Diversity Initiative was targeted to faculty development with the hope that it would affect course content and the faculty's way of viewing the world. To that end, the college president gave financial support to outside speakers, programming ideas, research work, and scholarships for attracting students and faculty of color. The excitement and commitment seems to have altered the culture and the classrooms sufficiently for students to have gained a new lense for critiquing teaching strategies and materials.

The implication drawn from our last finding that the study itself was an intervention in which the investigators served as role models of teacher/researchers is that the faculty should be encouraged to incorporate discussion of their scholarship into their teaching. This is especially meaningful, in our thinking, to undergraduate women who are just struggling to make the transition from student to trained professional. It is also important to the teaching field to promote, from the very beginning, the notion of teacher empowerment and the false dichotomy between those who teach and those who conduct research on teaching. It is our contention that if students can see possibilities for themselves as researchers, they will be less likely to be isolated in their classrooms and more likely to participate in the policy debates affecting practice.

Notes

This assertion is based upon the comparison between the SAT scores of our students (the majority of whom major in education) and national SAT scores published by the College Examination Board for intended education majors (1990).

An analysis of the data revealed no correlation between the responses to the demographic questions and the study findings. It did not seem to matter, for example, how many History credits students had completed probably because their thinking was most heavily influenced by the education program which offers little deviation from prescribed courses.

The faculty member unfamiliar to the respondents had significantly more "no shows" and somewhat fewer "volunteers" than did the faculty member with whom students were familiar.

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