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1. INTRODUCTION

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Education in the 21st century, and in particular schooling, is a composite set of contradictions that make navigating a pathway from student to teacher a complex endeavor to say the least. The last decade has seen the most significant articulation of educational reform through legislation such as No Child Left Behind, teacher education reform such as Teach for America and other alternative pathways, school structure reform in the image of corporatized private-interest publically-funded charter schools, and curricular reform such as Common Core State Standards and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) assessments. All of these so-called reforms are oriented around the (neo-liberal) idea that “accountability” helps to eliminate persistent gaps in achievement between over and under represented groups. Advocates of these reforms exist in both neo-conservative and neo-liberal groups, and state by state, they reflect the socio-political agenda of the times. So-called conservative and neo-conservative groups articulate concern for the money spent in education and for wanting a system that reduces dependency on social services; often their concerns have religious and moral foundations. So-called liberal groups articulate concerns for “equality” and “access” yet are often framed by the neo-liberal approach that respects traditional structures with the urge to privatize in order to achieve social gains. To date, neither side has articulated or had any significant impact on persistent achievement gaps despite a decade of this reform. Additionally, we rarely hear from teachers on the ground, and we hear even less from those in teacher training programs.

Perhaps the problem lies with society’s willingness to believe that there is a crisis at all – perhaps the system is functioning exactly as it is designed to function – to benefit some and marginalize many. That is, there are good reasons to believe that modern day educational reforms may be little more than a new type of “reform industrial complex” serving the financial and socio-political interests of sectors already privileged within society. What would happen in a free-market economy such as that of the United States if all gaps in achievement were eliminated and all children not only went to college but also graduated with

advanced degrees? If changes that both political and privatized reformists claim embrace came to fruition, already privileged commercial and privatized sectors and those having privileged identities would lose significantly.

So, what appears to be the context of education in 2013 is a landscape where talking about the challenges, and articulating a reform vision, matter more than eradicating the actual inequities of public schooling that maintain cycles of privilege and marginalization. In this arena, teachers have been made to feel voiceless and, in many circumstances, are used to maintain privilege. Gaps in achievement have remained persistent, as has our reliance on a service-dominated economy that has proven to be significantly beneficial to those in positions of power and wealth. In this backdrop, actualizing reform efforts in real and tangible ways is difficult work, and we wonder ‘who would want to enter the teaching profession?’ Teachers are often in the cross-fire of competing reform agendas, are given little respect in many social and political circles, and are faced with increased pressure coupled with dwindling support and resources. Yet, according to the National Center for Education Information (2011) in 2008, the last year with available data, nearly 147,000 new teachers entered the profession, representing about 5% of the overall teaching force in the United States. New teachers enter this work because they want to make a difference; they do not enter hoping to replicate privileging structures that disadvantage many in public schools. What they have entered is a system that has spiraled far out of control. Their quest to become teachers is admirable if not at times underinformed. Thus, pre-service teacher programs must do more to equip new professionals with the reflective tools to meet the challenges and opportunities of their classrooms, and also to position these developing teachers to speak honestly, truthfully, and consistently about their realities.

In our work as pre-service teacher educators, we strive to balance the truth about the realities teachers face while maintaining a real and guiding belief that change IS possible. While the system may be working as those with privilege would like it to work, our human capacity has the potential to be transformational. In our cohorts, we have suggested that if society can put people on the moon, certainly we have the capabilities to teach all kids to read, count, and reason to a degree that gaps in achievement could be eradicated. While we are aware of the complexities and challenges the contemporary landscape presents, we remain hopeful that with each cohort of pre-service teachers, we have the opportunity to be different and do different – that our teacher candidates can be agents of change focused on equity, and in that process we all serve as models of change.

Our candidates are placed with pedagogical others in the form of mentor teachers and foreign territories in the form of schools. After completing preparation programs, candidates are turned over to practitioners who may or may not be best positioned to help develop and mentor these new professionals. The journey can be intimidating and frightening, even with a program that offers support, collaboration, and a strong cohort of peers.

This book presents a different entry into the teacher education process as the text was designed by student teachers for student teachers. Instead of focusing on the macro-level politics that paint sweeping positive or negative pictures, we join nine pre-service teachers on their journeys to becoming teachers. Their intimate, personal, and engaging narratives share the real life perspectives of teachers in action. The voices in this book are those of pre-service teachers in the Holmes Elementary program, a yearlong urban education Master of Arts in Teaching program at Louisiana State University. Steeped in the traditions of socio-cultural foundations and curriculum theory, the program's commitment is to provide candidates not simply with a theoretical or pragmatic approach to their work, but rather to empower the candidates to be critical intellectuals located within a world of ideas where the cornerstones of their experience are curiosity and risk.

This book is about the experiences of the student teachers and is designed to help others entering the experience to understand the array of emotional and cognitive experiences they might experience on the journey to becoming teachers. While this is not a book about a teacher education program, the context for this book draws from the 2012–2013 experiences of a cohort of 43 student teachers; all of the authors of the chapters in this volume were engaged in a single yearlong student teaching placement concurrent with foundations and qualitative action research courses that resulted in a Master of Arts in Teaching degree.

Since 2011, one of the program requirements has required the candidates to engage in a research project that leads to a publishable manuscript – most often in the form of a journal article. Several candidates found success in publishing journal articles from their work. Many of the topics for research have examined how students, families, and teachers experienced various instructional aspects of schools such as centers, guided reading, grouping approaches, etc. We were motivated as faculty by our pre-service teachers sharing their voices and perspectives that we edited a special edition of a teacher practitioner journal, *Networks* (2013), to hear from other pre-service teachers throughout the world who had research to share with the larger educational community. As faculty, our premise was, and remains, that for change to manifest, teachers (both pre-service and in-service) must see themselves as not just responsible to the classroom and what happens within those four walls, but also to having a socio-political commitment beyond. Sharing research and establishing dialogue situated within research is one way to be so engaged; sharing with others to help them make sense of journey is our way of living the socio-political commitment promise of culturally relevant and responsive practices as articulated by authors such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay.

On the heels of the momentum that the Holmes program generated for pre-service teacher action research, the 2012–2013 cohort seriously examined and discussed the seeming lack of materials designed by pre-service teachers for pre-service teacher candidates. Rather than becoming frustrated with this lack of resources the candidates quickly moved from feelings of frustration to feelings of

empowerment – that their voices had a right to be among the pedagogical others who were “telling them” how to be teachers. Nine members of the cohort – Nicole, Katie S., Katie L., Katherine, Margaret, Kasey, Jessica, Mackenzie, and Kathy – articulated a desire to do something different with their research, something that might have the potential to reach people just like them – those interested in what it feels like to be in the student teaching experience. From their desire to write chapters that could come together into a collection, came this volume, the reality of these teacher candidates’ research. Throughout the remainder of the year, each candidate focused on writing a chapter that could speak about the emotional and affective dimensions of student teaching in a way that addressed their fundamental statement of, “I wish I could have read narratives like these as I embark on my journey!” With the support of the program faculty members Kenny, Hillary, and Thomasine, and Graduate Assistant Desiree, the nine documented their journeys in narratives. Their collection of narratives forms the basis for this volume.

The Latin phrases “domidium facti qui coepit habet” and “Cor ad cor loquitur,” come to mind when thinking about this work. “Domidium facti qui coepit habet” suggests that “(s)he who has begun has the work half done.” It is our intention that this text serves to sustain, guide, and support pre-service teachers while also encouraging others to share their voices and perspectives. By connecting professionals through their experiences, teachers understand that their work is not an isolated experience but rather part of a collective effort. “Cor ad cor loquitur,” or heart speaks to heart, is the hope of this text. The voices and narratives are at times raw, at times personally revealing, at times sad, and at times joyful – but the voices and perspectives are consistently honest.

The remainder of this chapter provides a more detailed overview of the program as well as the research and project process. While we want the process to be transparent and while we support each other’s work, we limit the focus on the program to this chapter. While it is important to understand the candidates’ program, the focus of this text remains on the narratives of the teachers. We end this chapter with some suggested approaches for reading this book as well as providing an overview of each of the chapters.

PROGRAM ORIENTATION

Program Organization

Nine pre-service teachers from a one-year Master of Arts in Teaching program in elementary education at Louisiana State University share their student teaching journeys in this volume. The Holmes Elementary Program was founded on and still draws from a core set of principles originating in the 1986 document “Tomorrow’s Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group.” The Holmes Group was a consortium of deans and chief academic officers at institutions throughout the United States who assembled to contemplate, reflect, and act with respect to the challenges of

preparing teachers and what seemed to be limitations of traditional approaches to preparing educators. The challenges in the mid-1980s have been intensified in many ways in the age of No Child Left Behind, Common Core State Standards, increased pressure on teachers to be “accountable,” and persistent achievement gaps between students in overrepresented and underrepresented groups. The findings from the Holmes Group spanned some 100 pages and became a catalyst for many teacher education programs to rethink their approach to preparing teachers for the late 20th century and beyond. The Elementary and Secondary Holmes programs at Louisiana State University were founded in the spirit of the organizing principles presented in the report of the Holmes group and continue to inform the programs today. In particular the Holmes Elementary program has committed to delivering a teacher preparation program which

1. makes teaching an intellectually sound endeavor;
2. creates relevant and intellectually defensible standards for entry to the profession;
3. connects our School of Education with local schools offering grades 1–5;
4. works to make schools better places for practicing teachers to work and learn.

To accomplish these goals, the program is organized as a year-long Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program which begins directly upon completion of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. Coursework during three additional semesters is tailored to move beyond simple methods instruction and delves into deeper issues, concerns, and opportunities in public education. This approach aligns the program with the Curriculum Theory Project of Louisiana State University.¹ The fundamental belief that we aspire for our candidates is “to understand the overall educational significance of the curriculum, focusing especially upon interdisciplinary themes as well as the relations among curriculum, the individual, and society” (Louisiana State University Curriculum Theory Project). The Holmes Elementary program strikes a balance between theory and practice, thus the program’s approach to teaching is based in being a sound intellectual endeavor as opposed to a standardized, rigid, and commercially produced approach to working in schools. We value that neither theory without a context nor practices without foundations can do much to bring about equity.

Candidates are able to take courses in curriculum and socio-cultural foundations that are linked to the field experiences they encounter throughout the graduate year. Through these courses they read scholars such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, Ana Julia Cooper, Gary Bateson, Ward Goodenough, Ken Zeichner, Christine Sleeter, Geneva Gay, Nel Noddings, David Stovall, Elliott Eisner, William Doll, William Pinar, Patti Lather, Lisa Loutzenheiser, William Ayers, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Tyrone Howard, Donna Ford, Cynthia Dillard, Wayne Au, Mike Rose, and Herb Kliebard. Program candidates have had the opportunity to Skype with some of the aforementioned scholars during the previous three years, adding a technological approach to professional development that we call Skype-a-Scholar.

In those interactions, candidates are able to dialogue and to create meaningful interactions with scholars. Candidates begin to see themselves as possessing intellectual capital, unlike many traditional teacher preparation programs.

As part of having a relevant and intellectually defensible standard, candidates are required to document their progression toward the standards set by the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI), the accrediting body of Elementary Education. Specifically, candidates gather evidence throughout the program that connects to the five major standard areas articulated by ACEI. Furthermore, candidates present their research and insights about teaching at a public defense in April of the graduate year. This defense is attended by faculty who serve to ensure that the candidates have sufficiently met the programs' standards to be recommended for certification.

To connect with the third Holmes group principle, we work as a program to be collaborative with administrators, mentor teachers, students, and families. This remains our greatest challenge. Often mentor teachers tell our candidates that program requirements such as lesson planning, connecting to reading, using assessment data to inform instruction, etc. are “extra” acts and not really fundamentals of teaching. At times, our candidates feel frustrated with what seems to be the disconnect between how practitioners approach their work and how the program critically situates engaged teaching. Despite the challenges, we remain committed to helping not only our candidates, but also working with their mentor teachers and the greater community of professionals in the schools to push everyone toward critically engaged approaches to teaching.

Finally, our relationships with the community and schools along with our own reflective data analysis process helps our program to continually adjust to the changing needs and opportunities of public education. We listen to the various stakeholders including principals, teachers, candidates, as well as students in grades 1–5 and their families, to make instructional and organizational decisions about the program. Our decision-making process always attempts to honor the perspectives of those with whom we work while simultaneously being comfortable with a certain level of tension that helps to push us all forward.

Program Structure

In lieu of student teaching during the final semester of the baccalaureate program, candidates complete a series of courses with an emphasis on pedagogy and content while their peers engage in student teaching. Pre-service teachers then complete a yearlong student teaching internship in an urban setting during the graduate year, coupled with on-campus courses, as a means of continuous reflection on the pedagogical component of their experiences in elementary schools.¹

In the summer, candidates begin the graduate program by enrolling in three courses designed to provide insights into curriculum, the socio-cultural foundations of education, and literacy. During the following fall semester and spring semester

candidates are engaged in the student teaching experience and take six hours of coursework concurrent with student teaching. In the coursework for the program candidates continue to examine relevant curricular and foundational issues and learn about the process of engaging in action research.

Based on the conceptual framework of the School of Education, field experiences are closely linked to university coursework and result in a rigorous graduate program emphasizing reflective practice, collaboration, and classroom-based inquiry. The field supervisors collaborate intimately with the program faculty to ensure a strong balance between theory and practice. The program faculty has a history of being present extensively in the schools to understand the various contexts of the classrooms within which the candidates work so that they can make meaningful connections between the field and coursework. Thus, the graduate year is a collaborative endeavor between university faculty, including the field supervisors and the course faculty as well as public school professionals, designed to enhance elementary students' learning experiences in schools.

Given that the guiding principles of the program are grounded in the School of Education's Conceptual Framework (reflective practice, inquiring pedagogy, and effective professionalism), candidates are encouraged to think reflectively and analytically on course readings and activities in their field experience classrooms, as well as their past experience in schools. This emphasis continues during the student teaching year to support reflective practices throughout the candidates' teaching careers. The graduate program involves extensive collaboration and dialogue among peers, public school teachers and mentors, and graduate faculty members. With the support of their mentor teachers and graduate faculty, candidates are encouraged to question, reflect upon, and challenge their beliefs and practices. In addition, graduate faculty and supervisors support and often help facilitate the exchanging of ideas between interns and mentor teachers as a way to improve instructional practices.

Research Component

The typical capstone project of the graduate year is an action-research project resulting in a publishable manuscript. In the fall semester, candidates enroll in a graduate seminar where course readings center on action-research. Concurrently, candidates reflect upon their experiences as student teachers and examine an aspect of the teaching-learning process that is of interest and provides a rich opportunity to enhance knowledge and practice. In this focused inquiry candidates integrate what they know about the social contexts of schooling, various theoretical perspectives, and their own values and beliefs about teaching and learning. Data collection for this action-research project continues throughout the year. Both mentor teachers and graduate faculty support students through the process of data collection and analysis. Candidates work closely with graduate faculty during the spring semester as they craft a publishable manuscript and prepare their findings

for presentation at two university-sponsored conferences for graduate student research.

The first conference, entitled Curriculum Camp, is a function of the Curriculum Theory Project. Curriculum Camp is an opportunity for graduate students throughout the Southern United States region, and in particular Louisiana, to present their research. Curriculum Camp brings many graduate students together, along with supportive faculty and mirrors the conditions found at many conferences. Papers are organized into sessions, there is a campfire session featuring keynote speakers, and many opportunities for mentoring and dialogue. Since 2011, candidates in the Holmes Elementary program were required to submit a proposal to Curriculum Camp. Over the past two years, over 50 candidates from the Holmes Elementary program have had the opportunity to present their research, including the nine chapter authors in this volume.

The second conference, the Holmes Elementary Conference is the program capstone experience and serves as the public defense for the candidates in the program. Approximately six weeks after Curriculum Camp, the Holmes Elementary Conference occurs for an audience of faculty, peers, mentor teachers, and family members. The conference day concludes with a theatrical production written, directed, and performed by the candidates to express their experiences in school. There is a keynote speaker and the candidates use a theatrical style similar to the Neo-futurists of Chicago, Illinois, and their long-standing production *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*.

THE “BOOK” PROJECT

Based on conversations with graduate faculty about the yearlong student teaching placement and expectations for the 2012–2013 academic year, nine pre-service teachers decided to work collaboratively to develop a book-length manuscript documenting their experiences. The idea to write this book arose from the frustration of feeling engaged by the readings and scholars presented in the program, but at times wishing for resources written by their peers – student teachers. They wanted to know how others beyond their program experienced what it means to become a teacher. While many ‘pedagogical and curricular experts’ had a positive influence on our candidates’ development as teachers, the candidates also realized that they would have benefited from a resource written by those in the journey itself.

In the fall of 2012, these candidates and program faculty began meeting to create a vision for a project that would result in a book exploring issues about student teaching in the 21st century. The book would be written through the lenses of the pre-service teachers’ experiences as they moved from “student” to “student teacher” to “teacher”. Candidates generated a list of topics that would be explored through individual reflection and journaling. The topics included expectations for the student teaching year, the student teacher-mentor relationship, the first day of

field experiences, and challenges in the classroom. These topics then led to an initial narrative exploring the question, “What were my expectations coming into student teaching?” What emerged was a tension between an ideal vision of teaching they had imagined, and the reality of classrooms that reflected a number of challenges that appeared to be in conflict with their vision.

Candidates’ narratives on their expectations vs. reality served as a point of discussion, analysis, and departure. Initially, the intent was to find common themes within their experiences and each theme would serve as a chapter focus. As the weekly meetings continued, the candidates and graduate faculty decided that each chapter would tell the story of one of the candidate’s journey through student teaching. Candidates agreed to use class research time as an opportunity to critique each other’s work, engage in dialogic feedback, and process the overall experience together.

As candidates began to journal and reflect on the year in the field, different themes for each candidate emerged that were reflective of both their experiences in the MAT program as well as in their personal lives. Candidates were grouped and paired with a graduate faculty member, who served as a reader of the developing narratives and provided feedback and posed questions encouraging further exploration and analysis of ideas, concerns, and experiences. As graduate faculty, we felt it was important not to censor the ideas and feelings of our students, but to honor the tensions and contradictions they were living in their daily work in the classroom. This approach allowed our candidates the opportunity to speak directly to you as the reader, sharing the varied emotions encountered throughout their field experiences. This process resulted in a collection of narratives offering readers a candid glimpse into the journey of student teaching, each journey focusing on a different aspect of becoming a teacher in the 21st century.

READING THIS BOOK

This book is organized as a series of nine individual narratives. What unifies these narratives is the experience of student teaching as cohort members of the same program. Each chapter, however, is reflective of a candidate’s personal experience, thus this book is not necessarily intended to be read in sequential order.

We have organized the chapters into three major themes. “Senses and Feelings” is the first theme and focuses on the important role our human senses and emotions play in the experience of student teaching. For Kathy, coming to knowing herself as a person and teacher emerged throughout her journey. Mackenzie focused on how to seize the “small” moments of student teaching to learn more about herself as a teacher. Katie L. worked through the emotion of fear and how to work with, through, and beyond fear to better serve children. Finally, Jessica used her background as a dance teacher to help understand how to achieve both professional and personal balance in elementary school teaching.

“What Have I Gotten Myself Into?” is the second section and provides honest and candid challenges that candidates often experience throughout their program. For both authors in this section, the challenges of placement and poor mentoring lead to alternate placements, which ultimately shaped their experience. A new placement and experience for Katie S. affirmed her choice to move forward, yet she realized the importance of reflecting upon her initial experience as a means to continue becoming a teacher. Nicole, on the other hand, looked back on her year of student teaching to question if teaching was really the right choice for her. Nicole helped us understand the importance of exploring multiple professional and personal options before committing to the work of being a teacher.

In the final section “Finding Voice, Charting Your Own Path,” authors deal with ideas related to voice and how to make their own mark on the profession. Kasey explored the power of questions when reflecting on issues she could not control within the context of her work. Katherine used reflective writing to provide a self-support system that helped her to endure the many challenges she encountered. Margaret used the negative stereotypes about teaching within the community to motivate her to engage in critical analysis of her teaching as she worked toward the best possible outcomes for students.

Note that the descriptions above that we are providing are not intended to impose meaning on the experiences, but rather to help provide a structure. As editors of this volume, we recognize that personal experiences, understandings, and contexts will influence how you relate to any given chapter and any given author. In fact, several chapters could easily live across all three of the organizing structures, and we have simply made a choice about location as a means of unifying the particular sections.

NOTE

- ¹ It should be noted that from the program’s inception through 2011, candidates engaged in a year long student teaching experience that was divided into two distinct placements. In the first semester, they were matched with a teaching partner from the program, and in the second semester they switched to an individual placement. This approach changed in 2012 to a single year-long placement. This single-placement approach became necessary because of the growth of the program and our inability to secure the number of placements needed for double placements. The candidates, students in grades 1–5, mentor teachers, and principals have had a strong positive response to the new model, and the program has opted to remain with this single placement. In this organization, the candidates experience a single classroom context for the year and build relationships with students similar to what they will experience as teachers.