Teacher Prep?

The Successes and Shortcomings of Teacher Preparation Programs

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Disclaimer: This is my first attempt at autoethnography. I have no idea what I am doing here, so here goes…

I have always loved school but I never wanted to be a teacher. My journey to Rio Grande’s Bunce School of Education was a rocky one. I initially enrolled in the Holzer School of Nursing. I was playing baseball at the time and nursing seemed like easy money. My freshman year went smoothly enough; I was in the top ten of nursing students and successfully balance baseball and school. During my sophomore year I finally hit a snag. I contracted septicemia through unwashed baseball injuries. The blood infection was a serious one and I spent several weeks in the hospital. I was forced to drop my classes, lost my scholarship and was removed from the nursing program. Panicked, lost and afraid I found my way into the teacher preparation program. In the spring of 2006, I enrolled in School and Community, the introductory class to the teacher preparation program. I cannot believe that I am a teacher when reflecting on this course. The professor, a southern veteran of the Korean War, was wholly traditional in his educational philosophy. Every meeting consisted of a miniscule man in a black suit delivering lectures unrelated to the readings, writing assignments and the audible slurping of green tea. The objective of this course was to prepare novice teachers to navigate the school environment and develop positive relationships with parents, what I received were the opinions of one man on the downfall of American society and dire situations in education.

After a summer of contemplating a return to the medical field, I settled on the Integrated Mathematics program. In the fall of 2006, I enrolled in Integrated Classroom Management, Planning for Instruction, Pre-Calculus, Statistics and the Principles of Physics. To my disbelief I earned A’s in both education courses a C in Physics, and D’s in both math courses. I was lost. I excelled in planning and management. I loved the interaction with students in the initial 10 hour field placements. I discovered a passion for teaching that laid dormant inside me. I enjoyed the students as much as they enjoyed working with me. I didn’t care what I was teaching as long as I was able to interact with students. The issue I faced was my area of licensure. I was a terrible student. Not unlike many college students, the ability was there to succeed but the desire was not. I was bored to tears in my math courses. I often used class time to catch up on sleep or go to the gym. I was still playing baseball and would forego homework for extra work in the batting cage. The assignments I did turn in were always perfect, but it wasn’t enough to earn credit in those courses. The professors resented my cavalier approach to my education and constantly reminded me of the importance of classes. Their words had little effect on me however and continued to underachieve until the spring of 2007.

The spring semester of 2007 was the most tumultuous of my college career. I enrolled in six courses; Culturally Diverse Field Experience, AYA Literature, Math Methods, Discrete Mathematics, Probability and Statistics, and College Geometry. In Culturally Diverse Field Experience I discovered my affinity for special needs students as I worked for a week as a tutor at Emma Elementary in Asheville, NC. The joy students exhibited when I read them a story or when they received assistance on their math homework warmed my heart and introduced me to the intrinsic rewards of education. I became addicted to the feelings I got when a struggling student and I finished an assignment together and they exhibited real comprehension. When I returned to Rio Grande I knew that I wanted to be an educator above anything else. I desperately wanted to devote all of my time to my new passion but one thing stood in the way, baseball season. I had worked my way into the starting lineup after two years of relentless training. I had finally earned what I wanted for so long and I wanted to throw it all away to focus on teaching. The voices of those closest to me made the decision even more difficult. My closest friends thought I was crazy for even thinking about hanging it up, my coach wanted to see me reap the rewards of my hard work, my advisor, challenged me to become a transformative educator, and my mother wanted nothing more than for me not to be shackled to the family business like my father all pulled me in different directions. As for fate, fate made my decision easy. In an early February practice I took a fast ball to the temple. I suffered a severe concussion and was hospitalized for two weeks. When I was able to return to school I was no longer able to play ball. My most difficult decision had been made for me, but the difficulties accompanying such a major decision were still very real. I was now alienated from my friends and my coach thought I was a quitter. The emotional stress of the situation was unbearable. Combined with post-concussion disorder, the emotional stress of a complete lifestyle change forced me to be on eight different depression medications in three months. According to my doctor, the medicine was to counteract a spastic serotonin gland. The only solace I found was in my studies. Reflecting, I find it ironic that the aspect of college that I valued the least ended up being the most therapeutic aspect of my existence.

In the summer of 2007, I enrolled in Multicultural Relations and Jr. Field Experience. These courses served as further confirmation that I was in the right place. My Jr. Field Experience was a decoupage of sorts. I spent time in summer school sessions and year round schools to fulfill the course requirements but the connection with students wasn’t really there. I was utilized by the staff as more of an aid than an educator. I received true inspiration in Linda Bauer’s Multicultural Relations course. Finally, all of the distracting city lights had gone out and I could finally see the stars. Linda and I shared the same emotional connections with students and we were instantly drawn together. I admired her energy and passion for teaching and modeled my teaching style, much to the distain of many other professors, after her free spirited but focused approach. Linda was the poster child for student centered education. The feelings and thoughts of her students were equally as important as the content of her courses. Linda was the first educator I worked with who truly valued the student experience. Her course centered on multicultural experiences and in-depth reflection on the emotional responses experienced by her students. The open discussions in her class allowed me to value the opinions of other while critiquing my own. Linda Bauer opened my eyes to a whole new world of educational practice where the teacher was a facilitator of critical discussions and lectures were not needed.

In the fall of 2007, I took five courses. Three of these courses were general education courses; World Civ II, Pre-Calculus and Probability and Statistics. Of these three courses, Probability and Statistics stood out. The course was taught by Dr. Michael Rhodes. Dr. Rhodes was a shining example of overcoming adversity. Dr. Rhodes overcame the loss of his right hand to earn a Ph.D. from Ohio State University. The determination of Dr. Rhodes to accomplish his dreams in spite of his personal adversity was an inspiration to me. In Introduction to Mild/Moderate Disabilities I was reunited with Linda Bauer. This course introduced me to my true passion, the education of students with disabilities. I became enthralled with the interventions, accommodations, and diagnoses. The spectrum of disabilities was fascinating to me. Ms. Bauer noticed my passion for special education and recommended that I change my major to intervention. I ignored her advice and maintained my course towards licensure in Middle Childhood Math and Science. In Educational Psychology, I met Dianne Downard. Through this course I was introduced to Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory and the works of Bruner, Vigotsky, Piaget and Dewey. The course introduced me to various classroom management methods and assessments. It was Ms. Downard who first planted the seed of a Marshall Doctoral Program in my mind, because she was starting a doctoral journey of her own.

In the spring of 2008, I enrolled in five courses once again. This semester my focus was on the science content knowledge I would need as a middle school science teacher. I also enrolled in Content Standards Alignment. In this course I learned about the existing Ohio Content Standards and how to plan my instruction around them. This course taught me to value the Ohio Content Standards and use them a tool to aid my instruction. The skills learned in this course proved to be very valuable to me as a novice teacher. My science courses included General Botany, Descriptive Astronomy, Physical Geology and Environmental Science. The courses proved to be extremely enjoyable. Most of the enjoyment came from sharing Descriptive Astronomy and General Botany with my sister. The most memorable moment of the semester came on a field trip into the forest with the General Botany class. The assignment was to identify various trees and shrubs in the local forest. As my sister and I walked through the forest identifying various plants, she noticed a black spot on my shoulder. The spot was a tick. She brushed the tick to the ground, turned around and walked away. As she walked ahead, I noticed several black spots on her back. She was covered in ticks! I informed my sister of the situation and she freaked out. She ran through the forest screaming, pulling her shirt off as she ran. She ran, topless, past Dr. Sigismondi and all the way down the hill to the car. We failed to complete the assignment but Dr. Sigismondi gave us credit due to her traumatic experience.

In the summer of 2008, I wrapped up my science content with Principles of Chemistry. This five week, sprint course was very difficult. The instructor was an adjunct. He was teaching his first course and was very demanding. The class met 25 times in five weeks. I also began focusing on my reading content during this semester. I enrolled in Adolescent and Young Adult Literature. This course was my first experience in learner centered classroom, outside of the school of education. Dr. Elizabeth Brown allowed me to select five books and write book reports on them. This was a very empowering experience. I was able to select content that I was interested in and work on my own timeline. For the first time, I enjoyed an English course.

In the fall of 2008, I attempted to complete my reading content requirements. The list of courses included The Literary Imagination, Phonics for Middle Childhood, Children’s Literature, Art in the Curriculum, Science and Nutrition Methods and Reading Methods for Middle Childhood. In Art in the Curriculum, Linda Bauer taught me to use art in the classroom as a way to enrich content and promote greater comprehension through student engagement. In Children’s Literature, I became aware of many authors and works that were appropriate in K-6 classrooms. In Science and Nutrition Methods, I learned how to monitor labs and create lessons that involve all students. This course prepared me for the middle school classroom and all the unexpected hiccups that can occur when dealing with students. Phonics for Middle Childhood and Reading Methods for Middle Childhood were sister courses. These courses met back to back and were taught by the same professor, Dr. Jan Schmoll. It was in this course that I learned the most valuable lesson in my undergraduate schooling. Dr. Schmoll held me to a higher standard than any other professor had before. She expected perfection and would not settle for anything less. I took these expectations for granted and put forth maximum effort in Phonics but tried to skate by in Methods. When finals rolled around I turned in a poor final paper and ultimately failed methods. When I met with Dr. Schmoll, she informed me that in order to expect good work from my own students, I needed to do good work of my own.

Despite the setback I enrolled in Clinical Practice in the spring of 2009. My course load consisted of Integrating Educational Technology, Reading Assessment and Development, Portfolio and Reading Methods in Middle Childhood. In Integrating Educational Technology, I learned to use web based inquiry projects to enrich classroom instruction. In Reading Assessment and Development, I was introduced to many different forms of assessment. I also learned how to use assessments to guide my instruction. Portfolio was a three week class that prepared me for the defense of my portfolio, the capstone assessment of the undergraduate program. After completing the obligations of these three courses I was able to focus on Reading Methods in Middle Childhood. With my new-found focus I was able to pass the course and enter Clinical Practice. Due to the length of the Reading Methods course I was not able to start clinical practice until April.

For Clinical Practice I was placed in a 6th grade classroom at Ashton Elementary. Ashton Elementary is a very small, rural school with two 6th grade classrooms of 20 students. I was placed in Mrs. Stephanie Morrow’s 6th grade class. In the first week of student teaching I observed Mrs. Morrow and her class. For the next three weeks I taught half of the school day and observed/aided Mrs. Morrow during the other half. In the final eight weeks of my placement I was fully in charge of the classroom. The socio-economic makeup of the class was very low. 95% of my students were on free and reduced lunch. Ashton scored below county and state averages on all standardized tests. This proved to be a very challenging experience. Many of my students had never left Mason County. This presented an unexpected gap between my students and I. I found great difficulty in reaching many of the students. At this point, Mrs. Morrow suggested that I get to know my students before planning for the next week’s lessons. I took her advice and took a personal interest in my students. The class was made up of students with very diverse abilities. Several of the students were on IEPs and others were perennial honor students. The ages of students ranged from 15 to 11. Once I was able to discover the students’ interests, classroom instruction became much more productive. I was able to find lessons that students could relate to and was able to engage the majority of students through web-based inquiry. Many of the skills I acquired in my undergraduate studies were utilized in this classroom, especially those from Linda Bauer’s classes.

My studies at the University of Rio Grande prepared me to properly instruct course in science, math and reading at the middle school level. I was able to assess student achievement levels and provide struggling students with interventions to help “bridge” the achievement gap. Despite the excellent preparation I received at the University of Rio Grande, I was not prepared to teach in a school with such a low socio-economic status. The difficulties that students at Ashton Elementary faced caught me completely by surprise. I was prepared to teach at an ideal, middle class school. I was not prepared to deal with 6th grade students who smoked, chewed and drank. I was not prepared for sexually active, starving or homeless 6th grade students. These issues were so destructive that they made the curriculum seem like an afterthought. Thankfully, I was placed with a master teacher who had taught in that setting for several years. With Mrs. Morrow’s assistance, I altered my expectations and began to focus on creating a safe learning environment for my students. After creating a caring, safe environment for my students, discovery and comprehension became common place. By the end of my clinical practice, seven students were on the honor roll and only one student failed.

Another area that I was not prepared in was the logistics of schooling. Throughout my studies I never experienced a full school day as a teacher. Field experience consisted of a period here and two hours there. When I was thrown into the classroom I had no idea how to maneuver through the school. Small tasks, like eating lunch, were incredibly daunting. I had no idea how to convey my concerns and ideas to my fellow teachers and administrators. I distinctly remember feeling very self conscious my first day. I felt like a new student thrown into a new school after an overnight move. It wasn’t until the end of the first week that I felt comfortable with Mrs. Morrow. The turning point in my tenure at Ashton came on an April morning. The 6th grade classes were meeting early to travel to the Columbus Zoo and COSI. One of the teachers wrecked her car on the way to the school. I volunteered to chaperon the other 6th grade class on the trip. Mrs. Greene, the principal, agreed to let me take on this responsibility. The trip went very smoothly and earned me the respect of all of the other teachers in the building. My experiences at Ashton Elementary were not typical, as no two teachers share the same experiences, but the lesson learned there have shaped the way I view teaching today.

When analyzing my undergraduate studies at the University of Rio Grande, I find myself questioning the curriculum. The focus on content knowledge and teaching methods are traditionally acceptable, but they fail to prepare novice teachers for diverse placements. The knock on traditional curricula is that it is engineered for ideal schools. The reality is that many novice teachers do not wind up in those ideal schools. Novice teachers often find themselves in diverse, low performing schools. These teachers are not prepared to deal with the issues that arise in these areas. This leads to frustration for teachers and students and ultimately, teacher burnout. These schools are not going to change until they are able to employ teachers who are prepared to deal with the issues presented by a diverse student body. By shifting the focus of the undergraduate curriculum towards dealing with diversity, novice teachers will be better prepared to instruct diverse students. The ability to cope with diverse issues will lessen the stress of novice teachers and reduce burnout. Sadly, this dream is not very likely to become reality. With the ratification of CAEP’s new standards, a focus on diversity is likely to take a back seat to new focuses like candidate selectivity.

Undergraduate programs should also revisit the clinical practice model. Many students are thrown into placements without any preparation. In order for these clinical experiences to become more worth-while, pre-service teachers should become familiar with the classrooms, teachers, schools, administrators and students they are going to be serving. This, coupled with on increased focus on quality clinical partnerships, can lead to novice teachers being better prepared for the real challenges they are going to face in the field. Thanks to CAEP’s new standard on clinical experiences, many schools will be forced to overhaul their clinical practice models in an attempt to provide students with more high quality clinical experiences. With a new found focus on diversity and clinical experiences schools can go a long way in truly preparing students for the difficulties that arrive in the real classroom.