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Back to the Trenches: Renewal and Reconnection with Middle Level Education Through Community Engagement

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An opportunity to participate in a community engagement experience during the spring of 2006 led to renewal and reconnection with day to day life in middle school classrooms. Past observations during field experiences and internships on both the undergraduate and graduate levels did not make the momentous impression that “living” in the classroom did. Had reality somehow vanished upon entry into the university environment? In what ways did memory of teaching experiences of the past in middle level education fade?

What I did

The invitation to become involved in community engagement through Coastal Carolina University came in the fall of 2005. During community engagement, the individual selected works with the community for an entire semester with no responsibilities to the university although the university maintains salary and benefits. Meetings with both university and local school district personnel resulted in the decision to focus on social studies in four schools with low standardized test scores. Instructional strategies, adherence to state standards, and level of thinking skills were selected by the district as areas of concern.

My engagement began in January 2006 and continued until May 2006. A rotation schedule was implemented in weekly increments. During the first week in each school, I met with administration, attended social studies departmental meetings for all social studies teachers in grades six, seven and eight, including special education. The following weeks were spent observing each teacher, modeling exemplary lessons, conducting

workshops on topics such as pacing, standards, lesson planning, varied instruction, classroom management techniques, and research for classroom resources. Feedback was given to individual teachers, school administrators and district coordinators. The school curriculum specialists requested specific helps to teachers who were in danger of not having their contracts renewed for the next year. The fact that I entered the school environment as an outsider rather than representing the state or district gave teachers the freedom to share weaknesses and accountability issues openly and frankly. The district requested a conference at the midpoint and conclusion of the engagement to discuss data and possible solutions to weaknesses found.

What I learned

Former observations by school administrators and district representatives led to teachers having reservations during my classroom visits. Teachers shared that visits from outsiders usually indicated they were being evaluated due to weaknesses or concerns about disciplinary, instructional, or classroom procedures. Reassurance of my role as an outside source of encouragement and supplemental help in the classroom was critical. I gained the confidence of most teachers by listening to them, making personal connections when possible, and spending time during duties, lunch, and conference periods.

Another area of concern was that most teachers were aware of national and state social studies standards, but did not use them as the basis for instructional planning. I was asked to create pacing guides for instruction based upon the

standards for each grade. The result was reluctance on the part of some teachers to approach the content from a perspective other than the textbook. In one case an eighth grade teacher continued to teach U.S. History although the students would be tested on South Carolina History on state testing in the spring. The interesting fact about this situation was that this teacher had attended state level meetings on the standards for eighth grade!

Another related revelation was the intent of some teachers to spend great lengths of time on topics of interest to them. Projects and classroom activities designed in previous years were strongholds to be included regardless of pacing concerns. This may be a result of the certification areas of many middle level teachers I encountered. Most of the sixth, seventh and eighth grade social studies teachers had original certification in elementary education. State standardized tests in social studies are based upon content while most social studies teachers with original certification in elementary education have limited content. The shift to social studies content in standardized testing has left many elementary certified middle level teachers relying heavily upon the textbook to address topics in which they have limited knowledge.

Many of the teachers I observed taught other content courses during the day with a few teaching only one social studies class. I noted that those teachers with one social studies class tended to rely upon "pure" (social studies content taught all day) social studies teachers for lesson planning and pacing. Mistakes in pronunciation and use of terminology were frequent. The certification issue is presently being addressed through No Child Left Behind. Many teachers admitted that they were unqualified to effectively teach social studies content.

The issue of higher level thinking skills was interesting. Most sixth grade classrooms were dominated by worksheets and textbook assignments. Higher level thinking skills were observed more often in seventh and eighth grade classrooms. Teachers who used standards in their planning were more likely to use activities and assignments involving higher level thinking skills perhaps due in part to the specific references to them in standards.

Renewal and reconnection came through "living" in the school environment all day, every day for an entire semester. Supervising teacher candidates and observing field experiences for undergraduate and graduate classes gave me a false sense of connection to the classroom. I relearned the pressures involved in accountability today. Early arrival, teacher duties, relationships with parents and administrators, lesson planning, pacing to insure all standards are met, standardized testing and maintaining student interest were challenges that had faded in the few years I had spent as a university professor. Each reconnection presented an opportunity to better prepare future teachers.

What I brought back to the university classroom

My community engagement experience has created an awareness of the need for content on the middle level. The struggle of teachers who feel they lack content knowledge in social studies as well as the time to build required knowledge is troublesome. The need has been addressed by No Child Left Behind, but for the teachers already in the classroom the struggle continues. Gaining middle level certification through lateral entry programs has not given them the knowledge necessary to engage middle level students in active social studies instruction. Perhaps through university and school district cooperation workshops or courses could be offered to provide such knowledge.

The opportunity to "live" in the middle level schools has made a tremendous impact on my classroom teaching, as well as bringing the school classroom to the university world. The public school's emphasis on standards education has broadened my approach to addressing the topic of educational standards. Not only are my students made aware of standards, but specific applications of those standards are included in lesson planning. My instruction now includes how to develop and follow pacing guides in addition to how to prioritize topics in content that standards stress as important when doing long range planning. Also, my time in the public classrooms provided real classroom examples for every topic discussed in education classes from puberty to diversity. Personal observations made in the school environment included administrators, teachers, students, support staff, instruction,

school activities, as well as relationships and responsibilities among those groups. The humor of many situations I observed captures and maintains student interest and can enhance student motivation in the learning process.

Another asset to my university classroom has been additional professional speakers from the schools I served. The relationships developed during the semester include principals, assistant principals, curriculum specialists, teachers, special education teachers and district personnel. Difficult classroom topics come alive through first-hand experiences and advice from these professionals. Administrators and district personnel share current trends, and sometimes develop relationships that can play a role in future hiring practices within the local district. Knowledge of the professional teacher program of my university of public educators is an asset for teacher candidates.

The sharing of professional services with the local school district strengthens the bond between local districts and the university. I have been invited to serve on school improvement boards, district forums workshops, and professional development seminars while public school district personnel work on university committees to improve the university experience of preparing highly qualified teachers. Lastly, I have a more realistic view of candidate life during the internship experience. Knowledge of recent changes in the middle level teaching experience has given me more empathy for candidates, and an arsenal of resources to assure a successful internship.

Returning to the trenches of middle level education has brought renewal and reconnection to the exciting and challenging world of education. Faded memories of what used to be have been replaced with the challenges and joys found in today's middle grades. Juggling the balls of standards, content, planning, higher level thinking skills, and effective instruction is the new requirement of accountability. My instruction on the university level has changed to reflect the skills and knowledge critical for those who will be "living" in the middle grades classroom. Is the experience worthwhile? Absolutely! It should be an opportunity every professor of teacher candidates should seek and embrace. "Living" in mid-

dle level classrooms for a semester changed my alignment of instruction and real life teaching today. Would I give another semester to public education? Absolutely! Just as field experiences are critical to teacher candidates, so should return to the trenches be for those of us who are given the responsibility to prepare teachers for the future.

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