Spring 1971

Toward More Meaningful Teacher Preparation

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Grand Valley State College, a state liberal arts college of 2,500 students near Grand Rapids, Michigan, in close cooperation with more than a hundred school districts in a three-county area, is operating a teacher preparation program that replaces all traditional educational courses with a three-pronged observation aide-student teaching sequence for students in their junior and senior years.

This program, providing more than 90 full days of student participation in public schools, has proved exceptionally profitable for the college and the school systems involved, as well as for the teacher candidates. The curriculum in observation and student-teaching aspects of the program, instituted in 1965, are not significantly different from those in the better programs elsewhere. As part of a human development course taught in the psychology department, students observe a school-age child and prepare a report, including data from their observation as well as from other available sources. Other features of this initial course are weekly lectures and small-group discussion sessions held twice weekly. No student is permitted to continue preparation for teaching without the recommendation of his psychology professor. He moves from this course to the teacher aide program and then into the student-teaching phase, which begins for all students with the opening of public schools in the fall and includes thirteen weeks of full-time teaching experience, plus weekly tutorials and seminars with a college supervisor.

The most innovative portion of the program is the teacher aide phase for teacher candidates, which comes between the human development course and student teaching. Developed on the premise that students can best discover and develop philosophies and methods for teaching through direct participation in many phases of public school operation, the aide program provides active involvement for each student at every grade level and in many facets of school administration. The college student planning to be an elementary or middle school teacher is assigned to a school principal, who, in conference with the student, plans the most effective way for him to become involved with children at every grade level, kindergarten to twelve; and through participation, to become familiar with the services of the school administrator, nurse, librarian, psychologist, custodian, and other staff members. Often the aide participates in

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school testing programs, outdoor education projects, field trips, in-service teacher conferences, and numerous other school-related activities. Approximately half of an aide's ten-week period is spent moving freely throughout a school system, assisting where the school and student can mutually profit. The remainder of the term is generally spent assisting several different teachers at the grade or age level where the student elects to teach.

With the consent of the school principals, most aides arrange to swap assignments with other aides so that all may spend some time in inner city and suburban schools, in graded and nongraded classrooms, and in team-teaching and self-contained classroom situations. The senior high aides are assigned to a supervisor, counselor, or principal, who provides opportunities for each aide to assist in his major and minor field as well as to work in other subject areas. These aides also seek experience in all areas of instruction.

Accompanying their school work experiences, the students participate in a campus program that includes informal experience and idea exchange sessions with local school personnel and tutorial periods with their seminar leader. Elementary candidates attend campus-based meetings twice a week for a total of four hours. Senior high candidates meet for an additional period with a professor in their major academic area for special assistance in the methodology and philosophy of that discipline.

The aide program is presented on a pass or fail basis. No student continues into student teaching without the written endorsements of the school administrator to whom he was assigned and the college instructors involved with the campus aspects of his program. An incomplete grade is given until the aide work is completed to the satisfaction of both school and college.

School administrators are pleased with the program for many reasons. During the last year, 378 aides were placed in schools. Letters of endorsement were received from 167 different school buildings, and in some instances, there was more than one letter from a school. The major points made by the school administration may be summarized as follows:

1. Schools are consulted in the general design and modification of the teacher preparation program and exert major influences.
2. School personnel share responsibility with the college in the preparation of teachers. Each school plans and supervises the work of its teacher aide, and the aide must receive a favorable written evaluation before proceeding into student teaching.
3. Schools also provide numerous resource persons, who participate in seminars with students on campus to their mutual advantage.
4. Permanent teaching positions are often filled with applicants prepared in the system while they were aides or student teachers.
5. Aides are useful to teachers and other personnel as they participate daily for significant blocks of time.
6. The interchange of questions and suggestions between aides and school personnel tends to invigorate and update the staff.
7. Services of the aides and other benefits, such as use of the college library by teachers and in-service seminars, adequately compensate for time spent in supervision and instruction of aides. No money is exchanged between school and college or between school and aides.

The college benefits for several obvious reasons:

1. Students attending school twelve

years with the perceptual framework of learners do not acquire the experiential background to realize meaning from formally presented statements by experts and therefore react negatively to traditional educational courses. This program combines for teacher candidates continous, ongoing experiences from the perceptual set of teachers that they can immediately relate to presentations by authorities on campus and in school and in discussions with other colleagues.

2. Eliminating a variety of less profitable courses in education is economical.
3. Teacher candidates are especially well prepared to teach, and especially so in the local schools.
4. The community is served as the student obtains experience.
5. The school assumes a major role in preparing teachers.

Students also endorse the course, citing the following reasons:

1. The variety of experience provides opportunity to explore personally many facets of public school education before deciding vocationally on a specific teaching assignment or on a vocation in another field. (A number holding strong convictions as to grade-level preference change dramatically. One young man who said he would not teach unless he could teach high school seniors is now happily helping second-graders learn.)
2. Each student discovers through participation the classroom environment in which he feels he can most effectively function as a teacher.
3. Prolonged contact in schools makes the transition from teacher candidate to teacher relatively easy.
4. Methods courses, which are tedious for inexperienced learners, are replaced by studying methods while working in classrooms.
5. Selection of a school for regular teaching is simplified, since the candidate is familiar with many local school systems through participation and discussion with other classmates.

How glorious it is—and also how painful—to be an exception.

—*Alfred de Musset*
Quoted in Creativity: The State of the Art
A Report of a National Seminar

What are the realities of the world of young people? In schools are we indeed focusing our attention upon the problems that these young people encounter? What are the differences between youth and age, between immaturity and maturity? What are the things youth sees which age has become blind to? And conversely, what are the things which maturity has revealed to the adult? Are we helping young people to meet and try to solve *their* problems, or are we in the schools projecting our adult problems upon them and expecting them to cope with them?

There is a time for childhood and there is a time for maturity. Each age has its developmental tasks, its own unique problems which fit to its expanding maturity. It is not the task of educators, of teachers, to unload their problems on the shoulders of youth. It *is* the task of the educator to assist youth to define its own reality.

—*Carol M. Fisher*
University of Toledo
1970/Educational Comment