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WHAT A LONG (AND WONDERFUL) JOURNEY IT'S BEEN: BECOMING AND STAYING PROFESSIONAL IN TEACHING

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As a beginning teacher in the second semester of the 1972-73 school year, I was eager, perhaps desperate, for help with classroom management. I needed lesson plans with creative ideas that would “hook” my students. Understanding how to connect the learning theory I studied in college to the day-to-day classroom life in which I was immersed seemed beyond the scope of my ability. I collected “how-to” books that were packed with ready-to-use-tomorrow activities and books of duplicating masters for instant worksheets. I devoured magazines like *Instructor* and *Teacher*, hungrily seeking ways to engage my students. There was little meaningful assistance from within my district—not from administration, nor from colleagues.

Orientation for new teachers included a tour of the district (which I missed since it was given only in September) and an introduction to the staff at a faculty meeting. No mentors were assigned, no new teacher handbooks made available, and no professional development sessions were held. New teachers were given the teacher’s guides to all adopted textbooks and a curriculum guide, which defined the scope and sequence for each adopted series.

My first class was a second-third grade “split,” which I thought I was prepared for—considering my early elementary background and student teaching experience in a second grade classroom. I took over in January for a teacher who was ill, and although it was difficult and frustrating, I made it through. Near the end of the year, I was informed I would move to the new middle school in

the fall—to teach sixth grade. I was grateful to have a job in those tough times, but I was also panicked over a level change I had little preparation for. Additionally, the new middle school was an open space building, designed for team teaching in the open classroom style. While I was in college, I was involved in a project with the university and local school districts which focused on process approach science, relying on experience-based learning instead of book-based learning, so I understood the theory behind open classrooms but had little practical knowledge.

That summer and over the next few years, I was lucky to be involved with a fantastic group of people who were serious about learning how to make the open classroom concept work. Since we were immersed in such a new way of seeing education, it was as if we were all novice teachers. We read and studied together. We talked and shared experiences, materials, and ideas. We were involved with professional development through the local ISD. We joined MAMSE (Michigan Association of Middle School Educators) and attended regional and state conferences. We began to share our successes and our knowledge with others, as a steady stream of visitors came to see the open space building. We also began presenting (in teams) at conferences and workshops. It was challenging and exhilarating work which brought us together as a very close-knit group. It also set the tone for my view of professional development as an ongoing process.

At the same time (beginning with my second full year at the middle school), I was enrolled in graduate school at Western Michigan University. Because of my commitment to middle level education, I enrolled in the Masters in Education - Teaching in the Middle School and Junior High School program. A part of that program was a focus on a content area. As an undergrad, I had majored in science because I felt it was my weakest area. With the experience I gained during my first few years of teaching, I realized that in order for students to succeed in any area, they had to be able to read and write well. As a result, my focus turned to the language arts. Through courses like “Reading and

Related Language Experience,” I was able to see connections between my graduate studies and my work in the middle school classroom. I was fortunate in that respect, because it allowed me to connect learning theory with classroom practice—a difficult connection for new teachers to make, but necessary if one is to be truly effective. I was also fortunate that several colleagues were involved in the Michigan Reading Association and the local Homer Carter Reading Council and made sure I became involved as well.

As I developed my teaching skills, an area which concerned me was meeting the needs of diverse groups in the regular classroom. Through my university studies, work with colleagues, and school district services, I had great support for working with students who had learning difficulties, but there was little available for meeting the needs of the brightest students. From that concern, I became involved with the “Gifted and Talented Committee” in my district. Through professional literature and conferences, as well as studying the work of Joseph Renzulli and others, I learned a great deal about what was being done in districts around the country. During the summer of 1978, I was given the opportunity to attend a major conference at the University of Michigan in preparation for the opening of our own G/T program that fall. Over the next three years, as teacher and coordinator of the G/T program, I was immersed in my work with gifted students. Once again, I was attending conferences and workshops, joining professional organizations, and eventually hosting visitors to our program and presenting professional development sessions myself.

Those early years served as a foundation for my belief in the power of professional development activity and the need for teachers to make commitments to their own development.

Budget woes brought the G/T program to an end, and my primary teaching responsibility through the eighties was in the area of developmental reading, as our students took a reading class in addition to the traditional English class. I was active in the local Homer Carter Reading Council and belonged to the MRA and IRA. It was an exciting

time as Michigan teachers and the Michigan Department of Education developed the “New Definition of Reading,” moving the focus in reading instruction from discreet skills to a more integrated approach. There was a lot of material to study, conferences and workshops to attend, and once again, new ideas to bring to fruition.

As the nineties approached, a new principal at the middle school was considering ways to increase students’ opportunities to have an extended connection to at least one teacher—a sort of home base. He questioned having separate English and Reading classes. Although having separate programs was the traditional approach in our building, he was not convinced the practice was academically sound. It was decided to combine the two entities into a two-period Language Arts block. Not willing to delay the change for another academic year while a new curriculum was developed, the new core class was to be put into effect at the beginning of the new school year. Teachers certified to teach both subjects were given the opportunity to teach the new core language arts class or to move to another area. Most chose the block

The combining of subject matters was natural for some of us, but it brought stress to others. It became obvious that the existing Language Arts curriculum and materials were not what they needed to be and would require serious study. My first step was to rejoin NCTE/MCTE, looking for the latest in research and practice. Through an article in *English Journal*, I discovered *A Community of Writers* by Harvey Daniels and Steve Zemelman; this was my introduction to professional development books written by teacher-researchers. It led me to other writers like Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins and Donald Graves. I was fortunate to receive a grant from the local education foundation to attend Harvey Daniels’ Walloon Institute during the summer of 1992. I studied the writing of Linda Rief, Tom Romano, and others, putting a more constructivist approach into my teaching, as we continued to develop the Language Arts block. In the summer of 1994, I was a charter fellow in the Third Coast Writing Project (NWP) at WMU. This experience cemented my

resolve to involve my colleagues in ongoing professional development along paths we chose for ourselves. We were able to purchase subscriptions to NCTE and IRA publications and sets of professional books for the LA Team and even able attend (and present at) MCTE conferences. The NCTE Convention was close for several years: Chicago ('96), Detroit ('97), Nashville ('98), and Milwaukee (2000), allowing me to attend the convention and the ALAN workshop (and, being convinced of the importance of such events, at my own expense.) After seeing my enthusiasm upon returning from Chicago, several of my colleagues attended at least one NCTE Convention.

Since my retirement from teaching in the middle school in 2001, I have begun a new phase in my career, working with preservice teachers at Western Michigan University, teaching a methods course in the teaching of writing to K-8 students. Again, new professional development challenges are before me. Not only do I need to stay current with best practice in the teaching of writing, I need to expand my knowledge base in the teaching of writing in primary grades and working with college students, as well as maintain awareness of legislative actions (such as "No Child Left Behind") which directly affect my students and the teaching profession in general.

Membership in professional organizations like MAMSE, MRA/IRA, MCTE/NCTE has benefits far beyond the professional journals they supply, books they publish, and/or the conferences they sponsor. There is a sense of community that comes from active membership in such groups. In the mid 1990's, a new kind of community began to evolve - the online groups known as listserves. There are wonderful groups of professionals supporting one another on lists sponsored by groups like NCTE and others. Teaching can be an isolated existence; spending the entire day in a classroom with students, usually behind closed doors, is often lonely, and time for meaningful professional conversation is scarce. Belonging to professional organizations can decrease the isolation and provide contact with like-minded professionals. I believe membership is one of the

first steps in determining the direction of personal professional development— something each of us must do in order to continue our own growth as professionals. It can be part of a wonderful, exciting journey.

About the Author:

Pamela Buchanan recently retired from the Comstock, MI public schools after 30 years of service. She is now an instructor of elementary English education at Western Michigan University.