Finding the Truths in Teacher Preparation Field Experiences

By Constance M. Perry & Brenda M. Power

In teacher education, as in many fields, there are several truths, each based on different assumptions and beliefs. "Conventional teacher education reflects a view of learning to teach as a two-step process of knowledge acquisition and application or transfer" (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996, p. 79). In this view of truth the university provides theory, skills and knowledge through coursework, and the school provides the field setting where knowledge is applied. The preservice teacher integrates it all. Student teaching is seen as the bridge between theory, knowledge and skills gained at the university and their application in the school (Britzman, 1991 as cited in Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998). In a review of 97 empirical studies focusing on learning to teach, most of the beginning teachers studied were enrolled in programs based on the conventional truth model. However, "the notion that coursework should provide teaching skills and information about teaching — and that beginning teachers can integrate and effectively implement that information — receives

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very little support from the research" (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998, p.151). Other views of truth reflect the belief that "learning to teach is not a mere matter of applying decontextualized skills or of mirroring predetermined images; it is a time when one's past, present and future are set in dynamic tension. Learning to teach - like teaching itself - is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing and who one can become.... Learning to teach is a social process of negotiation rather than an individual problem of behavior" (Britzman, 1991).

Other Truths

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2000) clearly articulates other teacher education truths. One truth "elevates the practical knowledge that very competent and experienced teachers have as it is grounded in outstanding practice, including the sound decisions and professional judgments teachers make as they construct curriculum and work within the uncertain contexts of daily life in schools"(p.15). Teachers develop their practical knowledge through experience and reflection aided by more experienced mentors. A second truth emphasizes that teachers generate the necessary knowledge to teach effectively by engaging with others of varying experience levels in systematic inquiry. Although knowledge generated by others is not to be ignored, "knowledge teachers need is generated locally when teachers regard their schools and classrooms as sites for systematic inquiry" (p.16).

We believe these last two truths reflect the complexity and the contextual nature of teaching. They seek to engage preservice teachers in a process of development and learning rather than feeding them the knowledge believed crucial. They reflect a constructivist theory of how people learn, which recognizes the importance of the individual's ever transforming mental schemes as they construct knowledge through dialogue, reflection and inquiry (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Perkins, 1999; Brooks & Brooks, 1999). We believe that general propositional knowledge about teaching has always been given a privileged place in teacher education programs — it is "Truth" with a capital "T." Experiential, practical knowledge generated from localized, systematic inquiry accompanied by dialogue and reflection has been regulated to "truth" with a small "t" — useful when you can find time for it with prospective teachers, but not central to the mission of teacher education. Much of our work over the past few years has sought to develop new models for working with teachers in schools which can keep local, systematic inquiry as the central force for development, collaboration, and generating knowledge for preservice teachers.

We do not negate the value of knowledge generated by university researchers and taught in courses. However, a constructivist view of what preservice teachers need to know and how they learn necessitates emphasis on experiences which actively involve learners in constructing knowledge. For years the methods and curriculum courses in our program (Masters of Arts in Teaching at the University

of Maine) have engaged learners in collaborative learning, inquiry and other "constructivist friendly" practices, yet the field experiences have remained very traditional. In the experiences, students worked with one cooperating teacher, taking over more teaching tasks as the semester progressed and often imitating the cooperating teacher without examining why.

In this article we describe our discomfort with the conventional format for the field experience and student teaching part of our teacher preparation program, what we saw as barriers to learning in that format, and some of the changes we made to allow preservice teachers, their mentors and ourselves to engage in inquiry, develop practical knowledge and grow as reflective teachers. We found in order to elevate inquiry to the status of "Truth" with a capital "T," worth pursuing as a central part of the mission of teacher preparation, we needed to let go of some of our long-cherished practices of mentoring and supervision.

The Impetus for Change

We are professors in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. Brenda's area is literacy and Connie's is curriculum and instruction. For the past several years we have coordinated the Elementary/Middle Level Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. In addition to coordinating the program, we both teach and supervise field experiences in the program. The year-long MAT program is designed for liberal arts college graduates who desire to become teachers. The program begins each June with students taking classes on campus. In the fall they have some classes on campus as well as a field experience and classes in schools, and in the spring they are full-time in the schools.

In 1999 we teacher educators hit a wall of contradiction between belief and practice. As coordinators of the Elementary/Middle Level Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, we were taking that program into one school district. After MAT students took courses on campus in the summer, Brenda was teaching a literacy methods class for them on site, rotating between two schools. Mentors who wished to join Brenda to look at guided reading and other literacy practices were invited to do so during the day while preservice teachers covered their classes. Connie was supervising the fall field experience, and both Connie and Brenda would supervise the full-time internship in the spring. We were building relationships but what was going on seemed a mismatch theoretically and practically. Supervision consisted of weekly visits to interns, where these individual preservice teachers would be observed and critiqued based on one hour of work with students. What about inquiry? What about the development of the student teachers' practical knowledge? What about a community of learners reflecting on their teaching together?

That year, 1999, we revisited the teacher education literature on university/school partnerships, inquiry and student teaching. We talked with colleagues about our concerns and sought out presentations on field experiences and school/

university partnerships at every conference we attended. We were reminded by these activities that others were also questioning the traditional format of field experiences; however, we had yet to find a solution to our discomfort. And then we read Knowles and Cole's chapter, "Developing Practice Through Field Experiences" in the Teacher Educator's Handbook (1996), and were struck by a question they posed: "How might field experiences in preservice teacher education better prepare teachers for the multiple roles and contextual complexities of life in schools and for careers as inquiring professionals?"(p.648). That question echoed our concerns. It recognized the multiple roles and contextual complexities of life in schools and the importance of inquiry and implied that the small " t " truths of practical knowledge and inquiry were important in learning to teach. That question validated our discomfort with the capital "T" truth of the conventional model of learning to teach. It gave us permission to look at field experiences as we knew them; and we saw at least three limitations standing in the way of teacher preparation for the multiple roles and complexity of teaching, including the student teachers' growth into inquiring professionals. We will briefly address what we saw as the limitations of the conventional model and then describe components of a University of Maine Professional Development School partnership that address Knowles and Cole's question by altering the truths of field experiences and student teaching.

Limitation#1

The Focus Is On Observable Behaviors

Too often student teachers focus mainly on the observable behaviors of their mentor teachers (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000), with little or no recognition of the mentors' reasoning behind those observable behaviors or their own thinking. Student teachers collect teaching experiences and view that collection as how one learns to teach (Johnston, 1994). This "simplistic way in which student teachers perceive learning as building up a stock of experiences for use at a later time" (p. 206) ignores the complexity and the contextual nature of teaching. It ignores the myriad of variables effective teachers consider in making long-term and minute-by-minute decisions about their teaching practices. It also ignores the fact that no matter how many experiences one collects, one cannot possibly collect enough for every teaching situation. Too often the conventional model of field experiences focuses on the collecting of observable behaviors as the means to translate theory into practice.

Limitation #2

Practical Knowledge Remains Implicit

Teachers' practical knowledge, the knowledge they develop through practice and reflection on that practice, is implicit (Schon, 1987). It includes theories that teachers develop about the complexities of interacting with learners and practicing

as a teacher in multiple roles. This practical knowledge is understood by the experienced teacher but is rarely stated directly to others (Carter, 1990). Yet, such knowledge has the potential to help pre-service teachers understand contexts of teaching and develop theoretically-based knowledge, strategies, curriculum and management strategies (Mewborn & Stanulis, 2000).

In the conventional model of teacher preparation, much of the feedback provided by mentor teachers to their student teachers focuses on activities immediately useful in the classroom (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987). Yet "learning to teach effectively requires that students access the minds, not only the observable behaviors of effective teachers" (Ethell & McMeniman, 2000, p. 87). Student teachers and mentors need to engage in conversations that make explicit the practical knowledge developed. Only with such a focus can student teachers begin to understand and be prepared for the complexity of teaching. Only when mentor teachers share their implicit theories, their thinking behind their teaching practices, will preservice teachers realize that modeling their mentor teachers' observable behaviors and banking such experiences (Johnston, 1994) is only skimming the surface of learning to teach.

Limitation #3

Inquiry Is Missing

Building inquiry into student teaching, often through school /university partnerships, comes highly recommended. In addition, the importance of teachers being critical thinkers, problem solvers and inquirers is regularly mentioned in teacher preparation literature (Knowles & Cole, 1996; Goodlad, 1994; Murray, 1993.). However, often inquiry is absent within the student teaching experience.

Some of the benefits of systematic, intentional inquiry by preservice teachers include: clarification of personal teaching theories; exploration of sense of self as teacher; and the development of awareness of and appreciation for inquiry, reflection, action and change as important components of the role of teacher (Rock & Levin, 2002). "Teachers taught in their preparation programs to view inquiry as an expected norm are more likely to overcome the real and imagined barriers to action research" (Keating, Diaz-Greenberg, Baldwin, & Thousand, 1998, p.389). By engaging in inquiry, student teachers can see that learning to teach is not limited to mastering specific behaviors, but rather includes the study of diverse children, curricula and teaching startegies in context. By engaging in inquiry with mentor teachers, they will begin to understand that learning to teach is never complete but a continuous process .

If student teachers do not engage in inquiry, and if they do not witness mentor teachers and teacher educators engaging in inquiry, how can they be expected to become inquiring professionals? The conventional model does not place inquiry at the center of field experiences.

Having identified the above limitations, we set out to create field experiences that incorporated dialogue, inquiry and reflection in order to focus on teacher practical knowledge and systematic inquiry. Over that year and the next we implemented, in collaboration with the mentor teachers and preservice teachers, a part-time field experience in the fall, followed by full-time student teaching in the winter and spring that would prepare preservice teachers "for the multiple roles and contextual life in schools and for careers as inquiring professionals" (Knowles & Cole, 1996, p. 648).

University of Maine/Brewer Professional Development Schools

With two elementary school administrators, one middle school administrator, thirteen teachers and twelve student teacher interns, we embarked on an adventure involving inquiry, discussion and reflection with the purpose of studying and fully experiencing the complexity of teaching and learning across three schools. Although, as a group, we initiated and implemented many new components in the university / school partnership, here we focus on four which directly impact the Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) interns' development into inquiring professionals, prepared for the multiple roles and contextual complexity of teaching. These four components continue to evolve but remain basic to our program each year.

#1 Curriculum Inquiry Class

Teachers and administrators identified and pursued curriculum inquiry projects based on their own or the school district's goals. Most of the projects focused on literacy. We as instructors also completed an inquiry project during the year, which involved our teaching practices within the interns' practicum. The class met during the day on-site in the school while the interns taught the mentor teachers' classes. The interns met with their mentors to discuss the mentors' inquiry project early in the fall and assisted them with the collection and analysis of data throughout the school year. We also all read and worked with Living The Questions by Hubbard and Power(1999).

One intern worked with her mentor to compile and chart the writing scores for first and second graders and design lessons to teach voice when it was identified as a weakness. And another helped assess the reading strategies first graders were using and plan and teach mini lessons on strategies less used.

By working with their mentor teachers on an inquiry project, the interns were obviously learning about the purposes and value of inquiry as well as the knowledge and skills required to complete an inquiry project. They were also learning much more. The teaming on inquiry allowed the interns to see that teaching was more than modeling observable behaviors and collecting experiences. Teaching also included studying children and altering one's practice to help children learn. The inquiry involvement helped the interns begin to see the complexity of teaching. The

teaming also provided an opportunity for mentor and intern to discuss the inquiry, the findings and the interventions, which provided an opportunity for the mentor to make explicit his or her implicit theories.

#2 Mini-Inquiries

Mini-inquiry projects are just that, quick investigations of issues that get raised through professional readings, conversations or occurrences in classrooms (Harste & Leland, 1999). The interns completed approximately seven mini-inquiries while working in the schools. Many came from intern questions and others from the teachers, administrators or us. Examples of mini-inquiriy topics included:

How do teachers begin the year?

How do mentor teachers keep their classrooms running smoothly?

What is appropriate integration of technology at specific grade levels?

How do teachers accommodate for special needs?

Throughout the year the interns interviewed their mentors and other teachers and read materials to complete the mini-inquiries. Once each intern completed the mini-inquiry, we all discussed the findings. Then two interns collected and compiled the data, writing up the results to be shared with everyone in the partnership through our newsletter. (Refer to Figure 1 for an example of a mini-inquiry that evolves each year as mentor teachers and interns revise the questions with us.)

Sample reflections on the mini-inquiry in Figure 1 include from one MAT intern: "In the whirlwind otherwise known as the first day of school, I was glad to have a place to focus my thoughts. From our interview beforehand I felt I understood a bit of Priscilla's philosophy and pedagogical style....Having specifics to look for the first couple of days helped me really reflect on the 'hows' of what Priscilla was doing with the kids. She helped me understand many of the 'whys' she did what she did. I know her reasoning." From another intern: "I found that listening to my mentor's beliefs was beneficial, but seeing those beliefs translated into actions in the classroom is most valuable."

The mini-inquiries provided a mechanism for the interns to question their mentors about teaching practices and goals, to delve into the mentors' reasoning behind their practices, and in doing so expand their own view of teaching. These inquiries also allowed the interns to learn from all the teachers, not just their mentor teacher, through the sharing and summary of findings. The mini-inquiries broadened their perspectives from one classroom to the school and school district. And, of course, they required the interns to engage in inquiry.

#3 Intern Inquiry Projects

As part of their winter/spring full-time student teaching, the MAT interns were required to carry out an inquiry project individually or with other interns. The

project involved an issue that encompassed more than a single classroom. Rather than having the topic and questions defined for them as with the mini-inquiries, interns developed their own questions and chose data collection methods and analysis techniques.

In 2000/2001, reading comprehension was a focus of teachers at the middle school. That year four MAT interns at the middle school decided to assess comprehension strategies of the seventh and eighth graders. They created a survey (see Figure 2), and surveyed all seventh and eighth graders, assessing their ability to make inferences and find the main idea in a reading and collected data on what student thought makes a good reader. The interns taught making inferences and finding the main idea in their reading and language arts classes for five weeks and assessed the students again (using a different reading selection). They found that their short- term intervention worked for more than 60% of the students. Not only were many students better able to find the main idea and make inferences, many added the use of comprehension strategies to their description of what makes a good reader and what readers do to understand text.

Another pair of interns looked at the achievement of and interventions received by identified at- risk students, after the principal had made the data anonymous so

Figure 1
Mini-Inquiry # 1
How do teachers begin the year?

The early days of every school year offer new and experienced teachers exciting opportunities and challenges. The beginning of the year is hectic, at times overwhelming, AND crucial to setting the tone and day to day routines for the year.

In this first Mini-Inquiry please interview your mentor prior to the first day of school to find out what he or she does the first few days of school and why. The following questions to help you gather data have been created by mentors and former interns.

1. What lifelong values, skills and attitudes do you hope your students will take away from your class this year and why?

2. What are examples of activities you do early in the year to support those goals?

3. How do you create classroom rules and why? How do you manage behavior problems and why? How do you communicate that to your students?

4. How far ahead do you plan early in the year?

5. Do your plans for this year differ from previous years? How and why?

6. How do you encourage risk taking and independence in students early in the year? Please give examples.

In addition while working in your mentor's classroom the first two days this fall, observe your mentor while reflecting on your interview.

that students could not be identified. Another project involved evaluating an after school America Reads program by interviewing children and parents.

The inquiry projects provided another inquiry experience for the interns and another example of how inquiry can inform practice. That in itself made it clear that teaching is much more than modeling one's mentor. The projects also caused the interns to look beyond one classroom and work in a collegial manner on a school issue. Such collegial work is a major part of a teacher's job today.

#4 Learning Labs

Traditionally, teachers teach behind closed doors, or if not closed doors, at least in isolated classrooms. For student teachers it is the same. They work with their mentor in their mentor's classroom. Rarely do either mentors or student teachers have the luxury of spending time in classrooms beyond their own followed by the discussion of teaching with colleagues. Learning labs, adapted from the lab model of staff development created by the Public Education and Business Coalition in Denver, Colorado (Keene & Hutchins, 1999), provide such an opportunity. In the Denver program groups of six to eight teachers sign on to observe a master teacher in a classroom setting several times over a few months. The observers sit in the back of the class and take notes. After the observation period, the observers meet with the master teacher and a facilitator to discuss what they saw — not to critique, but to learn from each other.

We adapted this model to work with interns and mentor teachers. First, we invited mentor teachers to host groups of colleagues and interns. A few brave mentors volunteered. Later others volunteered and the interns also hosted learning labs. In the learning lab model, a host mentor teacher or intern would invite a group of colleagues into his or her classroom for 45 minutes to an hour. Participants read a "pre-observation form" submitted by the host to get a sense of what and how the host wanted the classroom to be observed, as well as to obtain some background information about the class and the curriculum. After each learning lab, the group headed to a quiet spot for a 30-45 minute discussion of what was observed. We always served as facilitators for the labs.

Figure 2
Middle School Reading Survey

1. What do you think makes a person a good reader?

2. What do you think a reader does to help him or her understand what they are reading?

3. Read the following short nonfiction piece. Can you infer anything about the character from the reading? If so, what?

4. What is the main idea in the reading?

5. How did you decide that was the main idea?

We found that four to six extra people in the classroom did not disrupt the class. We enforced a strict policy of no "side talk" to other participants in the lab, and, within a very few minutes in every lab, the children forgot that we were there. We also emphasized over and over the need not to critique but rather to try, through questioning and discussion, to understand the decisions the teachers and interns made. Instead of saying "You should think about doing X instead of Z", as facilitators we coached participants to ask, "Why did you decide to do Z?" This nonthreatening talk pattern helped spark rich discussions of mentors' and interns' implicit theories and resulted in collective reflection on teaching (Power & Perry, 2002). As one mentor said after attending several different labs, "I had the chance to see colleagues at work and share in the conversations about underlying decisions in content and format choice." And an intern, after observing a lab said, "The opportunity both to observe a teacher, and then to be able to 'pick her brain' afterward was invaluable to me. It has made me more reflective about my own teaching."

Informal verbal inquiry through nonthreatening talk patterns allowed interns, mentors and us to delve beneath the surface of teacher behaviors, to discuss the reasoning behind teaching decisions and subsequently reflect on our own work.

Conclusion:
Small Truths

"The act of teaching is composed of an inner game and an outer game. It is possible to describe procedures for setting up groups, ways of helping students choose books, methods for record keeping, procedures for evaluation. This outer game can be diagrammed, specific in curriculum manuals and methods textbooks. And this information is clearly useful. Nevertheless, it provides little insight into the moment-by-moment decision making of the skilled teacher....The inner game is difficult to explain. For many teachers, it is tacit, intuitive, seemingly instinctual" (Newkirk & McLure, 1993, p. 115). The inner game encompasses the small "t" truths of learning to teach.

Through examining the conventional truth of teacher preparation field experiences and changing those experiences to reflect other truths - truths based on the valuing of teachers' practical knowledge and collegial inquiry - the inner game can become explicit. In the MAT Elementary/Middle Level program within the University of Maine/Brewer Professional Development Schools, the interns, mentor teachers, administators and teacher educators regularly engage in inquiry, discussion and reflection in order to help each other become inquiring professionals and educators with insight into the inner game. We have elevated experiential, practical knowledge generated from localized, systematic inquiry to Truth with a capital "T" in our teacher preparation field experiences.

"How might field experiences in preservice teacher preparation better prepare teachers for the multiple roles and contextual complexities of life in schools and for

careers as inquiring professionals?" (Knowles & Cole, 1996, p. 648). We believe we are on to something. What we are collaboratively undertaking is now consistent with our beliefs concerning teacher preparation. We don't have THE answer, the one truth. We have the beginning of some answers...or at least better questions to guide our practice. As inquiring professionals, we will, of course, continue to examine those questions!

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