

Building a Community of Learners: Manhattan College Elementary Education Program

By Judith Evans & Karen Nicholson

Developing a community of learners is important to any educational environment whether that setting is an individual classroom, a school, or a teacher education program (Peterson, 1992). Our purpose is to discuss the evolution of a community of learners within a recently created Elementary Education Program at Manhattan College, a small liberal arts college located in the Riverdale section of New York City. The first graduates completed the program in May 1999.

Manhattan College was founded in 1853 upon the Lasallian Catholic tradition of excellence in teaching, respect for individual dignity, and commitment to social justice inspired by the innovator of modern pedagogy, John Baptist de la Salle. Other elements of a Lasallian identity which are particularly relevant for the School

of Education include the emphasis on the importance of good student-teacher and student-student relationships and commitment to the underprivileged. In light of this Lasallian tradition, “the mission of Manhattan College is to provide a contemporary person-centered educational experience characterized by high academic standards, reflection on values and principles, and preparation for a life-long career” (Manhattan College Catalog, 1999-00).

The philosophy of the School of Education is

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closely related to the Mission of the College and can be described as *Humanistic Dialectical Constructivism*. *Humanism* as developed in the work of Rogers (1969), Freiberg (1994), Maslow (1970), and Combs (1984), is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the individual's emotions and feelings, attitudes, values, and interpersonal skills including open communication and the value of every student. This translates into an environment where students feel safe and secure, and where they are valued and feel that they belong.

There are many models of *constructivism* grounded in the research of Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and the Gestalt psychologist Bartlett as well as the philosophy of John Dewey. They all emphasize the active role of the learner in building understanding and making sense of information. However, the view most closely aligned with the philosophy of the Education Programs at Manhattan College is *dialectical constructivism*—which is the view that locates the source of knowledge in the interaction between learners and the environment. It is the branch of constructivism that suggests that knowledge grows through the interactions of internal (cognitive) and external (environmental and social) factors. Vygotsky's description of cognitive development through the internalization and use of cultural tools such as language is an example of dialectical constructivism. In this model, knowledge reflects the outside world as filtered through and influenced by culture, language, beliefs, interactions with others, direct teaching, and modeling. As in any constructivist approach the education programs support (Woolfolk 1998, page 356).

- ◆ complex, challenging learning environments and authentic tasks;
- ◆ social negotiation and shared responsibility as a part of learning;
- ◆ multiple representations of content;
- ◆ understanding that knowledge is constructed; and
- ◆ student-centered instruction (Driscoll, 1994; Marshall, 1992 in Woolfolk, 347).

Context and Historical Background of the Program

Manhattan College is located in Community School District 10 which is the largest of the 32 community school districts in New York City. Community School District 10 schools are used extensively as sites for pre-student teaching and student teaching for the education program. The district serves over 41,000 students enrolled in 44 schools representing 108 countries. Thirty-four percent of the students are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP), which is almost twice the rate of New York City. The ethnic makeup of the district is overwhelmingly Hispanic (66 percent), with 21 percent African American, 4 percent Asian-American and only 7 percent White. The district continues to undergo rapid changes due to the influx of immigrants (Community, 1999).

The Education Program at Manhattan College is 25 percent minority with the largest percentage (14 percent) being Hispanic. Many of our students come from homes where English is not the dominant language. Although Spanish is the most

common foreign language among our students, other countries of origin include Ireland, Greece, Poland, Italy, Jordan, India, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Columbia, and Nigeria. Additionally, many of our students are first or second generation in this country. While our students are a mosaic in terms of the richness of their backgrounds and cultural diversity many share a common background, the Catholic School System. As has been frequently documented in the literature by sources including Lortie in Myers (1995), Arends (1998), and Joyce and Calhoun (1998), an individual's prior personal experience in schools is a primary factor shaping his/her view of what constitutes a positive classroom and effective teaching.

Prior to 1992 Manhattan College students who were interested in achieving certification to teach elementary grades, Pre K-Grade 6, participated in a joint program in which they completed their degree requirements at Manhattan College and their certification requirements, including student teaching, at our sister institution, The College of Mount St. Vincent. Students taking the joint program conveyed their frustration at not feeling as if they were part of an education department at either institution. After two decades with this arrangement, administration at the two institutions agreed that Manhattan College should develop its own Elementary Education Program. Faculty from existing education programs in Special and Secondary Education and Educational Administration at Manhattan College developed a curriculum for an Elementary Education Program which was submitted to the State of New York for approval in 1992.

In 1994 and 1995 the authors were hired to implement this newly approved curriculum with Manhattan College students. We arrived to find that students were completing field placements in Catholic schools with limited experience with public schools. Those who graduated in 1995 would not even consider seeking employment in New York City Schools, choosing instead to return to the suburbs or to the Catholic Schools where they were comfortable. Their education program was not expanding their view of education and their potential for making a difference. Based on reflective writing assignments, surveys and formal and informal interviews, students were indicating that not only did they feel disconnected from the education program but were not developing an identity as a teacher or a vision of their role in the profession. Graduates indicated that they did not feel qualified and were physically afraid to enter urban schools. One challenge for the faculty, then, was to help students develop the confidence and competence necessary to break down the media generated stereotypes of urban schools and replace them with the reality of an environment that, while challenging, can be infinitely rewarding.

Having been elementary classroom teachers and teacher educators with a specialization in elementary education for over twenty years, we had well developed beliefs, based on research and experience, about how to prepare elementary teachers. During the first year we became aware of the need to refine the program to make it more compatible with current thinking on elementary education. We

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believed that there should be a focus on learners and their construction of meaning in a social, collaborative context. Further, we believed that our students needed to experience this kind of learning context as part of their teacher preparation program in order to develop an understanding of the concept in relation to their future students. In other words, they needed to be placed in learning situations where they could construct meaning individually and as part of a group. They needed to learn to assume responsibility for their own learning as well as for the learning of their peers.

In addition to making this philosophical shift to constructivism, we felt it was essential to examine the students' expressed feelings of isolation from the education department when they were part of the joined program. Based on this deliberation and our institutional mission, a conscious decision was made to emphasize the development of a sense of belonging and community among the students and faculty in the revised program. Our rationale for this inclusion of community development was consistent with Carney's (1999) definition of a community of learners as, "... a place where student learners are made to feel that their prior knowledge, the knowledge that they are acquiring, and the skills they are learning in order to acquire future knowledge are all tied together..." (p. 53). Other faculty teaching elementary education courses supported this vision, so the revisions in curriculum were prepared and submitted to the State of New York Department of Education in 1995 and approved in 1996.

The Beginnings of Change

The development of a community of learners within the Elementary Education Program has been a gradual process. As the course evaluations and student progress were reviewed at the completion of each semester we could identify differences between students who entered the program under the joint agreement and those who entered under the revised curriculum. We noticed that the most consistent shifts in behavior occurred in those students who were part of the revised curriculum from the beginning of their college careers. While we were pleased with what we were seeing on an impressionistic level, we needed to look more closely at the ways in which students were changing and why the program was producing a different kind of teacher. We realized that students had greater knowledge and skills, different attitudes about teaching and children, and different perceptions of themselves and their role as educators than their predecessors. They related to each other and the faculty with greater collegiality while progressing through the program. Juniors and seniors were sought as mentors by freshmen and sophomores. This community within the program developed as students recognized their common goals, engaged in common experiences, developed a shared language, and adopted the beliefs and value system of the College and of the program itself. As Dixon, Frank, and Green (1999) indicated, the members of our community had developed a history to guide the ways in which they

interpret new events and engage in activity. Additionally, as students started to look for teaching positions, they expressed the importance of identifying a collaborative environment and collegial faculty in their decision making.

With these realizations we wanted to identify what students were experiencing that had helped develop the community of competent, confident learners that we were seeing. First we identified three research questions to guide our examination of the program.

- ◆ How are features of community evident in the Manhattan College Elementary Education Program?
- ◆ What experiences contribute to the development of community within the program?
- ◆ Why is community building significant within a teacher preparation program?

We feel that by answering these questions we can strengthen and maintain the community building elements in the Elementary Education Program, transfer them to other undergraduate education programs within our department, and possibly offer insight to other education programs in a similar situation.

We were able to review three groups of students; those from the joint program, those in the transitional program and those in the redesigned program. Data sources included program materials such as projects, samples of student writings and video tapes of peer teaching, and formal and informal feedback from cooperating teachers and principals.

Shared Experiences: Shared Values and Beliefs

First we realized that our students engage in a set of milestone experiences as they move through their teacher preparation program. It is during these experiences that they are introduced to the conceptual strands of self-awareness, respect, cooperation, trust, responsibility, reflection, and social justice. Here, too, students first encounter the theoretical context that guides their learning. Knowledge, self-awareness, skills and dispositions are embedded in a carefully sequenced, developmentally appropriate series of courses.

Students who declare themselves as elementary education majors begin their journey in freshman year with a course entitled, *Theory and Practice for the Education Professional*. It is a semester of introductions and foundations. At the heart of this course, and key to our students' development as future teachers, are the examination of themselves as learners, an introduction to the theories that guided their earlier education and will shape new learning, and analyses of the characteristics of effective teachers, schools, and the education profession. On the very first day of class students begin the reflection and writing process that they will engage in during all of their education courses. They are asked to write a personal letter of introduction. They identify their outstanding characteristics, talents, likes and dislikes, personal strengths and weaknesses, and something they would like others

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to know about them. When they bring their letters to class the next day they are invited, but not required, to exchange introductions with one other person. That other person will, in turn, introduce them to our class. Interestingly enough, no student has ever refused to share this piece of work.

Discussions move to the students' personal histories as learners including the kinds of schools they attended, their important teachers, and major learning experiences both in and outside of school. Connections are made between those learning events and their impact on the students' beliefs about teaching and learning. Students identify significant learning events, who their teachers were, and how those experiences contributed to their development. They discover how both positive and negative experiences can produce significant growth and learning. This series of conversations culminates in an assignment to create a learning autobiography time line comprised of significant events that have shaped them as individuals and as future teachers.

Students have total freedom to display their time lines in any format they choose. Creativity and originality are encouraged, and what results is a gallery of stunning projects using a variety of metaphors such as game boards with no end, life as a series of gifts, flowers in the process of developing. Their metaphors show that they see themselves as unfinished products, still in the process of becoming adults. Their projects include mundane as well as deeply personal events in their lives. As students present their own work and examine the work of others, an understanding of and appreciation for the richness and diversity of the class and the uniqueness of each individual is being developed. In sharing victories, failures, and traumatic events, they take risks to disclose deeply intimate moments in their lives with their classmates. They discover similarities and differences in their personal histories, and are filled with respect for each other as they hear about the adversity some have overcome to reach college. It is a revelation when they realize so many significant learning events occurred outside of a classroom. Through their presentations, they are learning who they are, how they developed, and what they have uncovered about themselves as learners. Thus, the time line assignment is a bonding experience that sets the stage for sharing the growth process that their teacher education program will present. They have begun to form a community of learners based on trust, respect, and shared experiences.

The time lines lead students to examine their decisions to become teachers, that common goal held by each member of the class. Having looked back at important learning events in their lives, they are ready to examine the ways their experiences have shaped their views of teachers and teaching, schools, and the role of education. They are guided by questions that ask them to remember when they first wanted to become a teacher; determine the people and experiences that influenced their decision; and then identify the strengths they feel they bring to teaching as well as characteristics in themselves that cause them concern as future teachers. They are also asked to identify their worries about the profession and reactions of significant

others to their decision. Finally, they are charged with the task of identifying insights they have gained about themselves and the education profession as they have prepared the assignment.

The essays "On Becoming a Teacher" indicate that experiences with children such as babysitting, being teacher assistants, camp counselors, and CCD (Catholic religious instruction) teachers helped them recognize their love of children and the gratification they derived from this work. Invariably these essays also reveal a group of young adults who are caring, altruistic, and enthusiastic about teaching. They are concerned with the welfare of children, and deeply committed to making a difference in the lives of children. As Ayers indicates in Guyton (2000), they believe that teaching for social justice can change the world, because education is the social institution which controls access to important opportunities and resources. Through these carefully crafted learning activities, students began to recognize their shared goals and new ways of interacting with each other, two essential features of community.

Other changes are also taking place at this time. Readings, discussions, and cooperative learning experiences guide students to understand the theories that shaped their school experiences. They are also introduced to constructivists' perspectives on teaching and learning that underlie our program. Our view of constructivist learning is consistent with Windschitl's (1999) description that stated, "...that their students' background knowledge profoundly affects how they interpret subject matter and that students learn best when they apply their knowledge to solve authentic problems, engage in 'sense-making' dialogue with peers, and strive for deep understanding of core ideas rather than a laundry list of facts..." (p. 752). Students in the program are immersed in a constructivist approach to learning including class activities such as small group discussions and peer teaching. These activities help them begin to see learning as a social interactive process in which they take responsibility for their learning and for the learning of others.

While examining their histories as learners and the kinds of schools they attended, we find that most of our students have attended Catholic Schools at some time prior to college. Smaller percentages have attended public and private schools. We realize that regardless of their backgrounds, each of our students has one view of education based on his/her own schooling. Their experiences have shaped their understanding of how classrooms are run, and of what constitutes teaching. It is our challenge to expand their perspectives to view education through a kaleidoscope in which they discover the variety of options in schools and schooling, the many faces of education. Developing their awareness of their individual lenses was the beginning of the process; visitations to a variety of school programs such as inner city and suburban public schools, private schools, Catholic schools, classes for students with special needs, and after school programs provide the next step.

Students make a series of school visits during which they acquire the skills for making purposeful observations, recording data, analyzing, and discussing find-

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ings. During the first few field experiences students function solely as observers. As the term progresses and they revisit schools, they engage in their first experiences working with children as teachers in classrooms. They are beginning another shift, the transition from student to teacher. These are exhilarating moments for them and they frequently comment in their logs, “Working with children has made me realize that I have made the right career choice for myself.” “Today I felt like a *real* teacher!” Field experiences reinforce our students’ commitment to the welfare of children and to making a difference in the lives of those most in need. Reflections in their journals indicate their aversion to harsh and unfair treatment of children and the strengthening of the democratic concepts underlying their value of social justice. Occasionally these initial experiences provide students with a different kind of insight that, “Teaching is not what I thought it would be.” “I realize this is not the career for me.”

Field assignments designed to develop understanding of content also accompany work in other courses and give students opportunities to make connections between theories from class and practices in the field. Their understanding of learning theory and knowledge acquisition are shaped by clinical and field experiences. Gradually we see a pattern emerge which is similar to what Flores (1999) describes where emerging teachers turn to their classmates for help, solve problems together, and work together toward a common goal. This shift in perspective empowers the students to be more responsible for their own learning and that of their peers. They have begun to discover the strength that comes from community. Thus, from their first field experiences as freshmen through senior student teaching, students reflect on the meanings of the authentic learning experiences provided through their field work. Field experiences at all levels provide a forum for reflection on learning. In this case, the act of reflection contributes to the process of community building by allowing students to:

- ◆ recognize their shared goals to become effective teachers;
- ◆ use common language to engage in discussion as they construct meaning of their field experiences;
- ◆ test their evolving values and beliefs; and
- ◆ interact in collegial, supportive ways with each other.

Each school visit is followed by reflections and class discussions of similarities and differences found in schools, among students and teachers, and in the content and methods observed. Graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams and attribute charts are used to organize and record findings from discussions. Faculty facilitate the development of observation skills and the practice of reflection. We then engage in deconstruction and meta-analysis of what we are modeling as a way of identifying and analyzing what has been learned from the experiences. Field experiences are provided in each year of the program and lead students from observing and participating, to teaching individuals, small groups, and eventually

whole classes during senior student teaching. Field experiences provide increasing amounts of direct work with children, peer support from classmates, and mentoring from cooperating teachers and college supervisors.

While developing their theoretical understanding of learners, teachers, classrooms and schools, our students are also participating in clinical experiences on campus. These include writing lesson plans, being videotaped presenting these lessons to peers, receiving feedback from the instructor and peers, viewing the video, and writing a reflection on the lesson and the process. Later in the program an additional step is added as the “teacher” shares his/her decision making and thought processes in developing and implementing the lesson with the peer group. The peer group then provides feedback on what was effective based on theory which has been studied in class. Group members also offer alternative strategies which could be considered for the lesson. This process is intended to help the students develop their reflective skills and recognize that there are a variety of strategies and techniques that can be used. They are no longer looking for “the answer,” but are learning that by working with peers they are able to see and value alternatives.

Clinical experiences also help our students examine and develop an understanding of the process of complex skill development. They acquire a cognitive understanding of a skill, followed by practice with feedback, either from an external source such as a peer or instructor, or from self-reflection. In addition to developing the skill, this process also encourages students to develop trust in their peers and in their ability to reflect accurately on their own learning, a necessary ability for life-long professional development and learning. At the same time many students share in journal entries or through personal conversations that, “I had no idea that teaching was so much work,” or “There is more to teaching than I ever imagined.” They go on to say that if individuals outside education knew how much work was involved, teachers would receive much more respect. This is the beginning of their identification with the profession.

Finally, throughout the program, student progress is measured using a variety of forms of performance-based and traditional assessment techniques. In addition to more traditional methods such as teacher-made tests, students share their achievements in pivotal courses and at the end of the program through the presentation of course and student teaching portfolios. Through these assignments students learn to identify their growth as educators in relation to learning outcomes. Reflective commentaries that accompany materials cite specific examples to support and explain general statements about their learning. From these rich documents, students also learn to identify continuing goals for themselves and their future development as education professionals. “Portfolios on Parade” are capstone events where the community of students and faculty come together in shared celebrations of students’ achievements. Portfolios become the ultimate demonstration of student reflection, analysis of theory and practice, self-evaluation, and their

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emergence as lifelong learners. Their presentations serve as definitive evidence of the community students and faculty have developed within the elementary education program. Collegial discussions highlight the shared goals, common language, shared beliefs and values and ways of interacting within this community.

Discussion

Kauchak (1997) presents the idea that in order to develop a culture and a sense of community within that culture you must have a shared sense of purpose where each individual can develop a sense of identity that bonds him or her to the unit. He goes on to say that culture refers to the attitudes, values, beliefs, and ways of acting and interacting that characterize a social group, which include the attitudes and beliefs we have about learning and the views we have about schools and classrooms. According to Banks (1999), cultures are dynamic, complex, and changing and include the ideations, symbols, behaviors, values, and beliefs shared by a group. This is very important for individuals pursuing education as a career since as Banks says “individuals who know the world only from their own cultural and ethnic perspective are denied important parts of the human experience and are culturally and ethnically encapsulated” (p. 1). The development of community and a shared culture is particularly important for the program being discussed since the majority of graduates now teach in the New York City Schools or those in the surrounding geographic area, which have a tremendous amount of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, language and country of origin as described in the introduction.

Our diverse student population gains insight into their similarities and differences through their *Learning Time Lines*. They see how their early experiences as students have a significant impact on their expectations for a teacher education program. By participating in shared experiences our students are able to discover their similarities and differences, and consequently are able to see the relation of their own cultural diversity to their effectiveness as future teachers. As a result they acquire a shared sense of purpose. This finding is supported by the work of Eby and Kujawa (1994) where they state that a sense of community and shared purpose grows from open communication between students and teachers and a realistic understanding of each others’ perceptions and needs.

We have found that the milestone experiences described above are integral to establishing a context for bringing our diverse student population together to allow community to develop within the Elementary Education Program. For example, shared goals are recognized in students’ letters of introduction, in their essays “On Becoming a Teacher,” and in the goals they identify for themselves in portfolio final growth statements. Common language of the profession is acquired through readings, discussions, and cooperative learning activities. Beliefs and values about teaching, learning, children, and schools are recognized and refined through readings, discussions and reflections on field experiences and are articulated in

portfolio philosophy statements. Professional knowledge, skills and dispositions acquired from shared experiences throughout the Elementary Education Program result in the behaviors and attitudes valued in this community of educators. Shared goals, beliefs and values, common language, and ways of interacting are all features of community, which Sterling (1998) says move students beyond themselves to connect with others. Thus we see that the learning experiences included in course work contribute to the development of community within a constructivist environment. These features of community are all evident in student discussions, writings and teaching behaviors.

Framework for Building a Community of Learners

Areas of Development	Representative Program Activities	Outcomes Related to Community Building
SELF-AWARENESS Understanding of: personal history self as learner personal lens	Letter of introduction Time Line Essay, “On Becoming a Teacher” Portfolio Philosophy statement	Shared goals
KNOWLEDGE Knowledge of: theories of teaching theories of learning content students	Readings Reflective and informative writing Cooperative Learning activities Peer Teaching Discussions Field experiences	Common language
DISPOSITIONS self awareness respect cooperation trust responsibility reflection social justice	Readings Discussions Peer Teaching Reflections on theoretical learning and field experiences including interactions with diverse student populations	Common/shared beliefs and valued identify with the profession
SKILLS Application of theory to practice	Class activities Projects Videotaped clinical teaching Field experiences	Shared experiences and ways of interacting

Conclusions

The foundation of the Elementary Education Program at Manhattan College is a strong belief in the central role of the learner in the education process which has been modeled in education courses and emphasized in the field placements. Our goal is to focus our students' attention on the central role that learners play in creating or constructing new knowledge through collaboration and community. The theory for this programmatic stance closely relates to Constructivism as described in Kauchak (1997) which states:

1. Learners construct their own understanding rather than having it delivered or transmitted to them.
2. New learning depends on prior understanding
3. Learning is enhanced by social interaction
4. Authentic learning tasks promote meaningful learning.

The significance of building community within our elementary education program brings Kauchak's four components together as students acquire greater understanding of teaching and learning through use of prior knowledge and experiences while working together on meaningful assignments. Community helps our students build understanding of themselves and their histories as learners; strengthens the collegiality and sense of belonging that enables them to take risks as learners; helps them develop an appreciation and respect for the similarities and differences among each other. Finally, community is significant because it strengthens our student's resolve in their commitments to themselves, to their future students, and to the education profession.

An important outcome for students completing the program within this community, is that they have a clearly articulated individual philosophy of education which expresses their beliefs, values, and reasons for becoming teachers. Their philosophies are then reflected in their practices as new teachers. Students leave the program having increased their awareness of the complexity of the education profession and the role of teachers and learners. They have changed as they acquired self-awareness and new insights related to teaching and learning. However, they have also maintained their commitment to the Lasallian philosophy of excellence in teaching, respect for individual dignity, and commitment to social justice. Their resolve to make a difference in the lives of children has been strengthened by the knowledge that they can. These significant outcomes for students are the result of developing as teachers within a community of learners that shares common goals, values, language, and milestone experiences.

Implications

Students who learn within the context of a community live a new way of

learning. They realize from their own experiences as they prepare to become teachers that their program community has given them a sense of belonging and has enabled them to feel connected to others. Community has been essential to their well-being, self-esteem, and academic success (Dodge, Jablon, & Bickert, 1994). They recognize how they have flourished and grown from students into teachers. They also understand that it is difficult to be an excellent teacher alone, for teachers need opportunities to share ideas, struggles and solutions with one another. The long range significance for them is that they take these understandings and insights into the learning environments that they will establish for their future students.

The process of becoming a teacher is both cognitively and emotionally challenging. If we as teacher educators want to sustain our students through this demanding journey, establishing community within our education programs will provide multiple sources of support for them as they pursue their goals to become teachers. Providing a program community can help our future teachers become successful learners, problem solvers and decision-makers (Dodge, Jablon & Bickert, 1994). In a society where teachers are often criticized, rarely respected, and usually underpaid, community strengthens the sense of self, resolve to become a teacher, and respect for the work we do. Community within our teacher preparation programs will enable us to prepare teachers who foster positive social values for a democratic society while teaching these values to increasingly diverse populations. Community offers a context for producing effective teachers who are prepared to meet the expectations of society for educating students in the 21st century.

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