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Wall, Amanda, Christine Draper. 2017. "Taking it to the Streets: Teaching Methods and Curriculum Courses On-Site with Partner Schools." *Middle Grades Review*, 3 (1): 1-9.
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March 2017

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Wall, Amanda and Draper, Christine (2017) "Taking it to the Streets: Teaching Methods and Curriculum Courses On-Site with Partner Schools," *Middle Grades Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol3/iss1/5>

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Taking it to the Streets: Teaching Methods and Curriculum Courses On-Site with Partner Schools

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Abstract

Our introductory middle grades course meets on-site in a partner school. This context for the course derives from an overall emphasis on partnerships in our College of Education. Meeting on-site affords teacher candidates more continuity in a middle level classroom so that they can observe young adolescents and middle level teaching. At the early stage of our program, this course meeting on-site helps prepare teacher candidates to contribute positively to schooling for young adolescents.

Standards for accrediting agencies such as the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP Accreditation Standards, 2013) and the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, 2012) advocate clinical partnerships. What partnerships look like, though, varies from institution to institution, and even within institutions and teacher preparation programs. Our middle grades teacher preparation program, similar to other initial-licensure programs for undergraduate teacher candidates, emphasizes field experiences (Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, & Thompson, 2016). Indeed, our middle grades teacher candidates are immersed in field experiences with our graduates having gained more than 1000 hours of clinical experiences over the course of four semesters, culminating in the critical student teaching semester. In their first semester in the middle grades program, though, teacher candidates spend fewer than 40 hours in classrooms as part of their enrollment in an introductory middle grades course. To augment their growing knowledge, skills, and dispositions during that course and to ensure that this field experience is not just seen as completing hours to meet a basic standard, we decided to shift the context for the course. It now meets on-site in a partner middle school to ensure for “sufficient depth, breadth, diversity, coherence, and duration” (CAEP Standard 2.3, 2013).

Institutes of Higher Education and teacher preparation programs need to ensure that teacher candidates enter today’s classrooms with a substantial theoretical background as well as an understanding of effective methods. Additionally, teacher preparation programs are

structured into coursework (including theoretical foundations and methods, as well as content courses) and field experiences (Preston, 2017). This is not an easy task—to say the least. Oftentimes there is a perceived disconnect between the university, classroom observations, and prior experiences about teaching and learning (Zeichner, 2010). Oftentimes teacher candidates will question the validity or practicality of methods being taught on the university campus if they are not seeing a match between the innovative methods being discussed on campus with the more traditional approaches that are regularly employed in their field observation sites. Hobson, Malderez, Tracey, Giannakaki, Pell, and Tomlinson (2008) observed that some prospective teachers considered what they learned at the university (or higher education institutes) as being only partially useful to their actual classroom teaching. Putnam and Borko (2000) also noted that many teachers complained that learning in training courses was “too removed from the day-to-day work of teaching” (p. 6).

At the middle level, teacher candidates need to understand young adolescence, in accordance with Standard 1 of the Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards (AMLE, 2012). They certainly need foundational knowledge about young adolescent development and diversity as explained through research and course texts. They also need specialized preparation so that they can learn about young adolescents through coursework and field experiences. This preparation, in turn, can better prepare them to value young adolescents and be prepared to teach them, in accordance with *This We Believe*

(NMSA, 2010). They need to learn about and observe good teaching at the middle level as they begin to implement best practices themselves, as Cook and colleagues expressed: “For good teaching to be most effective, the specific population being served should be carefully considered and thus, greatly influence the teaching decisions that are made” (Cook, Howell, & Faulkner, 2016, p. 1).

To augment the alignment between university-based coursework and field experiences, we felt that it was necessary to think about our introductory middle grades course in a new manner. More specifically, we wanted to strengthen our school and university partnerships by situating this course on-site at a partner school. Teaching such a course on-site would enable greater collaboration between the school and university, and would offer more opportunities for teacher candidates to link theory and practice to classroom observations; additionally, we hoped this on-site field experience would encourage more collaboration among school and university faculty and administration. Especially early in the sequence of our teacher education program, a course taught on-site enables teacher candidates to spend more time within a regular school context.

This article describes how our College of Education expanded its partnership with one middle school through a middle level course taught on-site in the school. Through this aspect of the course structure, teacher candidates can learn about, observe, and take part in middle level curriculum and instruction that is developmentally responsive, challenging, and empowering, in accordance with attributes of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). Our description of this course and the related school-university partnership also addresses topics in the recent research agenda developed by the Middle Level Educational Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) of the American Educational Research Association on the impact of field and clinical experiences (Jagla, Winter, Wall, Bickmore, Haverback, & Kemp-Graham, 2016). Also, through teaching on-site, we seek to enhance a vision shared by all stakeholders, including community partners, by involving perspectives of higher education teacher preparation faculty, middle school teachers and administrators, and by including middle school students’ perspectives and understandings (NMSA, 2010).

Why Partner? An Overview of Partnerships

Middle school and university partnerships are collaborative efforts between both parties to leverage resources and expertise to achieve outcomes that may not have been realized without the involvement of both parties (Barnett et al., 1999). The development and benefits of school–university partnerships have been widely studied (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Goodlad, 1991; Stephens & Boldt, 2004; Wiseman & Knight, 2003). Creating genuine partnerships between universities and schools demands a “fundamental reconsideration of the roles and functions provided by all organizations that have an interest in and responsibility for teacher development” (Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 204). This can be a challenge or an opportunity.

In most partnerships, there are resources and supports that are viewed as necessary to initiate, maintain, and institutionalize effective partnerships (Rosenberg, Brownell, McCray, deBettencourt, Leko, Long, 2009). It is essential for faculty and in-service teachers and administrators to collaborate in designing and implementing pre-service teacher education, field experiences, and mentoring. Teacher candidates should have multiple opportunities to apply and reflect on what they are learning in university coursework.

Teacher candidates need to be actively engaged in co-constructing a contextualized knowledge of teaching practice through engagements with both peers and more experienced practitioners. It is through this contextualization that the academic knowledge of subject matter is brought together with the knowledge of particular students and the best ways to meet these diverse students’ needs (Hollins, 2015). By partnering with schools through courses taught on-site, teacher candidates have multiple opportunities to engage in longer and more structured field experiences and observations, more frequent and sustained supervision and feedback, and to provide students a direct link to view theory in action as the school site. All of these efforts help the pre-service teacher feel more prepared to teach.

A description of our college’s partnerships will provide a context for this essay. Our College of Education offers initial licensure programs in

early childhood education and special education in addition to middle grades education; graduate programs lead to advanced degrees in these areas as well as other areas like instructional technology, counselor education, school librarianship, and educational leadership. Our university is in a rural part of a Southeastern state, so teacher candidates in our initial preparation programs have field experiences within a sixty-mile radius of campus. Our partner districts also include rural schools, and it is common for a county to have one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Within each school where teacher candidates are placed, there is a clinical associate (usually a teacher or administrator) who acts as a liaison between that school and the college for field experiences. The large geographic area where we place students affords them a diversity of placements in a variety of districts and towns.

To focus our efforts with partnerships, our College of Education instituted a Partnership Network. The foundational principle of the Partnership Network states that improving public education requires educator preparation institutions and public schools to collaborate to simultaneously improve the recruitment and retention of highly effective educators in our Southeast region to increase P-12 student learning.

The effectiveness of the network is due to mutual trust and respect of the partners as relationships are expanded and built, resources are shared, and collaboration and honest communication are achieved. Through this collaborative process, the goal is to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers who will directly impact P-12 student learning and will serve as effective mentors for teacher education candidates.

The overarching governing board of partnerships is our Partnership Council, which includes a designee of the local school districts, the dean of the College of Education, the partnership coordinator, the associate deans of undergraduate and graduate programs, the director of clinical experiences and practice, teacher education program directors or a designee, the STEM outreach coordinator, community agencies, and the executive director of RESA (Regional Educational Support Agency). Christine (second author) currently serves as partnership coordinator. This board meets twice a semester (mid-fall and mid-

spring) at the university or a local school site and collaboratively identifies needs that can be most effectively addressed by the combined efforts of the university and school districts—including teaching on-site policies and protocols.

Overview of Middle Grades Program

Our middle grades program spans four semesters; prospective teacher candidates enroll in a pre-professional block of courses prior to admission to the middle grades program. Teacher candidates in our middle grades program select two concentrations from language arts, math, science, and social studies. In the first semester of the program, teacher candidates take the introductory middle grades course, the focus of this essay, as well as a literacy course and content-area coursework.

In the second and third semesters, teacher candidates take content-area methods courses that include a related field experience. Each of those field experiences requires more than 200 hours in the classroom. For the first several weeks of the semester, teacher candidates spend three mornings per week in their assigned classrooms. During this time, they plan a learning segment or instructional unit that they will teach in their field experience. They work with their university supervisor and their classroom teacher as they develop this unit. Components of the unit include a unit matrix, content outline, and all lesson plans and instructional materials. Teacher candidates also learn about their school and community in order to write a context for learning. The final semester is the student teaching semester, when teacher candidates accrue more than 600 hours in their assigned classrooms as they work towards full responsibility for planning, instruction, and assessment.

Even though students are in their field experiences for a large number of contact hours over the course of the middle grades program, the number of semesters they are specifically engaging in lesson and unit planning is limited. Based on this, we felt that it was essential to work directly with our clinical partners to redesign our middle grades teacher candidates' first field experience in our program to meet on-site at a local middle school to ensure a developmentally responsive, challenging, and empowering field experience (AMLE, 2012).

What Does Teaching On-Site Look Like?

Dewey (1904) argued that teacher preparation should include grounding in both theoretical and practical aspects of teaching, although this has sometimes resulted in a “historical divide” (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009) between foundations courses and methods courses. Foundations courses tend to introduce principles, theories, and frameworks for teaching (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999), while methods courses tend to focus on practices, strategies, and structures for effective teaching. Our introductory middle grades course, now taught on-site, includes both theoretical and practical knowledge to help pre-service teachers connect theory and practice.

Here we describe one school-university partnership, our foundation middle grades course meeting on-site in a partner school. There are several models different institutions have enacted for teaching university courses on site in partner middle schools (e.g., Andrews & Thompson, 2016; Williams, Virtue, & Smith, 2016). Although the specific teaching arrangements vary, there is an emphasis on merging research and methods with best practices in authentic classroom settings. The pattern for our course came about through consultation with other faculty who had experience teaching on site, with the school principal, and in review of documents such as *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) and the AMLE Standards for Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards (AMLE, 2012). Both Christine and Amanda (first authors) were part of these conversations; Christine has taught the course in the past, and Amanda is the current course instructor.

The middle school where the course meets on site was selected through mutual interest in developing an existing partnership. Our program had placed teacher candidates in later field experiences at this school for many years, and the district and school leadership were interested in strengthening the partnership with the College of Education. A series of conversations including the superintendent of this small district, the principal, Christine, Amanda, and the director of clinical experiences and practice helped both the school personnel and college faculty establish goals for teaching a course on-site at the school. The principal, who also acts as clinical associate, sees the importance of “growing teachers” by hosting

teacher candidates at the school; several of our graduates now teach in this district. We also discussed more routine details such as where teacher candidates should park, how they sign in and out, where in the building the class should meet, and what the daily schedule would be for teacher candidates as they observed and assisted in classrooms. These conversations took place one spring, and the course began to meet on site that fall semester. At the end of each semester, the principal and instructor debrief the most recent iteration of the course and adjust as necessary for the following semester. Throughout the semester, the instructor regularly checks in with teachers who host teacher candidates for any concerns, suggestions, or other feedback.

One day each week, teacher candidates arrive at this school for class. The school has allowed us to use their professional development room for these class meetings. In this space, we have access to a white board and a Smart Board. However, we do not have internet credentials in the building, so some activities from previous semesters have been modified for our current context. During each class meeting, teacher candidates and the instructor engage in learning and discussion related to a wide range of topics including: young adolescent development; diversity among young adolescents; middle level philosophy; introductory lesson planning; reflection on classroom observations; differentiation; teaching strategies; and assessment. Teacher candidates also disperse in pairs to assigned classrooms for one hour. Generally, they observe and assist their assigned classroom teacher. They also complete several assignments related to the field experience. Some assignments draw directly on what they observe in the classroom, school, and community, and how they reflect on those contexts. For other assignments, teacher candidates apply what they have learned through the field experience to tasks such as creating a unit matrix or designing their idea of an effective middle school. Otherwise they observe and assist their classroom teacher. After an hour, the preservice teachers return to the professional room to debrief their morning in the classroom and continue with other course topics.

A few days during the semester, the class does not meet so that teacher candidates can spend a full morning in the classroom setting. They complete a shadow study (cf. Lounsbury &

Johnston, 1988) of a middle school student one day in order to synthesize ideas about young adolescent development and middle level philosophy through an individual child's experience at school. On other days, they may have structured observation protocols. Such structured protocols are used in various programs (e.g., Andrews & Thompson, 2016; Mee & Haverback, 2016) to focus teacher candidates' attention to varying aspects of teaching and learning, such as the arrangement of the classroom, instructional materials and resources available, or school mission statement and rules. In addition, they observe and assist the supervising classroom teacher. These full morning observations provide time for teacher candidates to observe multiple classes and perhaps to attend meetings and spend a planning period with their teacher. Teacher candidates schedule other days with their teacher in order to meet the required hours for their field experiences.

Meeting on-site affords our preservice teachers many benefits. They are able to enact their developing identities as teachers more consistently throughout the semester. When the course meets back on the university campus (for example, on the first day of class, or if a class meeting conflicts with the school's scheduled holidays or professional days), teacher candidates are in their element as university students. But when the course meets on-site in the school, they are there as *teachers*.

Additionally, they enjoy more continuity in the classroom by being there regularly. In semesters when the course has met regularly on campus, teacher candidates only spent four to seven days in schools over the course of the semester. With the course meeting on-site, they enter the classroom much more frequently. This schedule allows them to get to know the typical routines of the classroom and school better. Even on days when they only spend one hour in the classroom, they develop rapport and relationships with middle grades students. Important for their development as teachers, they are able to connect course concepts to the realities of classroom life more directly.

Affordances and Challenges

Teaching this course on site has provided many benefits for our teacher candidates, as noted above, but it has not been without challenges. The teacher candidates themselves have

responded well to the course meeting onsite overall. Our college has a policy of placing candidates as far as 60 miles (one way) from campus due to our rural setting. This middle school counts as one of our closer partner schools, so teacher candidates have been receptive to the distance. They also know that they will spend multiple mornings each week at their placements in subsequent semesters, so making the drive once a week is reasonable for them. Since teacher candidates spend part of each morning in actual classrooms, they have been engaged in being on-site. The course is blocked for a full morning, so teacher candidates who have an early afternoon class are able to return to campus in time.

This course typically has an enrollment of around 20 teacher candidates. Since their primary roles are to observe and assist, we often pair them in classrooms. On average, we place them with 10 cooperating teachers who are identified in consultation with the principal. Teachers who have fewer than three years of teaching experience are not yet eligible to host teacher candidates. Our college also has a policy that teachers who host student teachers do not host teacher candidates at other stages of the program. These two factors, combined with larger than usual class enrollments, has meant that some teachers have hosted three beginning teacher candidates when the numbers have warranted that scenario.

Other factors related to teaching on-site include any permissions or paperwork that may be needed. Our teacher candidates already signed off-campus waivers as part of being in the field. Amanda consulted with Christine, the partnership coordinator, as well as the department chair, and the associate dean about any necessary curriculum forms or other documents that may be needed to shift the course from campus to the school setting. The Partnership Council also has developed policies and procedures for teaching on-site so faculty have these resources.

Possibilities for Practice

Research in teacher education has shown that there can be a significant divide between educational research and pedagogical practice (Flessner, 2012; Honan, 2007). Labaree (2004) stated,

Teachers and researchers not only find themselves in two very different institutional contexts—the public school and the university—but they also tend to carry with them sharply contrasting worldviews that arise from the distinctive problems of practice they encounter in their respective roles. (pp. 90–91)

However, we aim to link research and practice through many of our partnership efforts, including our course that meets on-site, as teacher candidates need multiple opportunities to assume the role of the teacher and to test out practices and methods in genuine settings and field experiences (Grossman et al., 2009). It is through ‘deliberate practice’ that instructional routines and can become more automatic (Ericsson, 2002). It is essential for both the university instructor and the middle grades teachers and administrators to be intentional in the classrooms being visited on-site. It is imperative to systematically connect research and theory that students are studying at the university with carefully constructed clinical experiences that contextualize learning practices. This requires significant changes in designing effective and engaging field experiences in collaboration with local schools that many traditional teacher preparation programs are not currently undertaking. Teaching courses on-site can provide a critical link between theory and practice; however, this is not an easy task. Universities and schools must find creative ways to increase time for collaboration so that all voices are taken into consideration when developing developmentally responsive, challenging, and empowering field experiences for future middle grades educators. Our experience teaching a foundation middle grades course on-site has been a partnership beneficial for a range of stakeholders all committed to meaningful and quality education for young adolescents.

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