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Partnering with a Middle School: Making a Space for Rural Middle School Student Voice

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Abstract

In this Practitioner Perspective, we explore two boundary spanning field experiences provided to teacher candidates to center middle school student voice and lived experiences supported by a school-university partnership. Surveys and teacher candidate reflections provided perspectives on both experiences and how these connected to coursework. We describe how both experiences influenced teacher candidates, enhancing their understanding of young adolescents, and bridging the theory-practice gap. Lessons learned through these experiences and future recommendations are included.

Introduction

At the heart of our work as teacher educators is the importance of expanding the nature of learning experiences for middle level teacher candidates to support their ability to understand young adolescents and their context. As faculty in a teacher preparation program at a southeastern university, we were motivated to provide meaningful experiences that would support our teacher candidates' better understanding of young adolescents within a rural context, something we had struggled to capture adequately through reading and discussion within the traditional course context. We sought to provide boundary-spanning experiences to expose our teacher candidates to a broader perspective regarding partnership members, particularly the context of the young adolescents with whom they interacted.

The act of boundary crossing “entails stepping into unfamiliar domains” (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 333) and “encountering difference, entering onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent, therefore unqualified” (Suchman, 1994, p. 25). Individuals who are boundary spanners engage in stabilized boundary crossing routines, acting as a bridge between organizations, often tasked with building or maintaining connections (Fisher & Atkinson-Grosjean, 2002; Leonard et al., 2021; Scott, 1998; Wegemer & Renick, 2021). As teacher educators guiding our teacher candidates, we envisioned ourselves in this bridging role to promote a greater understanding of young adolescents and their contexts to build significant relationships

(Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Leonard et al., 2021).

In her meaningful TED Talk, “Every Kid Needs a Champion,” Rita Pierson (2013) shared the following about building relationships with students:

Some people think that you can either have it in you to build a relationship or you don't. I think Stephen Covey had the right idea. He said you ought to just throw in a few simple things, like seeking first to understand as opposed to being understood.

Pierson's philosophy undergirds the two boundary-spanning experiences we implemented within a middle level education teacher preparation course in partnership with a local rural school district: a middle school student-panel seminar and a bus tour. By boundary-spanning experiences, in this context, we refer to experiences whereby teacher candidates learned from those beyond university faculty and outside of what would be considered traditional field experiences. According to Leonard et al. (2021), young adolescents should be included in the lexicon of “boundary-spanning teacher educator” because they can share real perspectives and stories that give life to the abstract stories that teacher candidates hear from university instructors and mentors” (p. 23).

These experiences were provided to support teacher candidates' growing understanding of adolescents and the specific context of middle school students in this rural setting. Their first experience consisted of a panel of six middle

school students where a moderator asked teacher candidate-compiled questions. The second experience was a bus tour of a large (over 450 square miles) rural county, including a visit to the most rural of the district schools. The bus tour, in particular, was meant to help teacher candidates understand the rural context and the bus experience of the young adolescents with whom they interacted (Schulte, 2018). While young adolescents were not part of the bus tour experience, it did help to make the lived experiences of the young adolescents the teacher candidates were engaged with more comprehensible. In addition, these bus tours were led by district employees, expanding those who educated teacher candidates beyond traditional university faculty. To make both experiences a reality, we employed a previously established partnership further strengthened by these two experiences.

School-University Partnership

Several years ago, a unique school was opened on our university's campus to serve ALL students in grades 6 and 7 in the local school district, not just students of faculty and staff or based on a lottery system or some other exclusionary method. The district serves students in a rural county of approximately 50,000 people, with a median household income of about \$43,000 a year and significant poverty facing at least 25% of the population, compounded by the knowledge that a large portion of the community attends private schools or opts for homeschooling. The school was developed in response to the forced consolidation of county and city schools, making this rural school district one of the largest in the state. As the only grades 6 and 7 school in the district, it is large given its rural context, serving approximately 700 students. The school district operates the school, making it unique for campus schools. In addition to all the facilities needed to educate middle school students, the school has classrooms, offices, and collaborative spaces managed and used by university faculty and students.

The district and university designed, raised funds, and built this unique rural school to achieve the mission spelled out in our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): "To create a leading academic and research center for rural education development." Our rural education partnership has four main objectives: (1) to improve the education for every student

enrolled in public school in the local school district, (2) to support professional growth for teachers and staff, (3) to improve teacher education and provide a real-world learning environment for teacher candidates, and (4) to collaborate on education research to advance rural education. This school-university partnership (SUP) has provided both opportunities and challenges for teacher preparation, including these two experiences, and has genuinely impacted the nature of our teacher preparation program.

Coburn et al. (2013) defined the term school-university partnership (SUP) as a continuing collaboration between research (e.g., universities) and educational institutions (e.g., K-12 schools) that promotes educational innovations. SUPs were viewed in the research literature positively as vehicles to collaborate that universities and schools found mutually beneficial (e.g., Lynch & Smith, 2012; White et al., 2010). Additionally, findings indicated SUPs were capacity building for all stakeholders, affording opportunities for professional development, curriculum development, and research (e.g., Burns et al., 2015; Clary et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2016). Types of partnerships varied greatly; however, the benefits included a "built-in support network" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 110) for both preservice and in-service teachers, improved learning for students, and consequential connections between theory and practice for teacher candidates (e.g., Adonious, 2013; Jackson & Burch, 2016).

Collaboration

The MOU created an architecture for collaboration, but the real work happened because of multiple reinforcing relationships. The new school was built on long-standing relationships—teacher candidates had always completed field experiences and student teaching in the district. University faculty served as guest speakers in classes, as science and reading fair judges, built school gardens at the elementary school, and supported after-school science clubs. We also had a long history of collaborating on research and grant-funded projects—from school bullying to health education to teaching with primary sources (Brenner et al., 2023). However, the school provided unique opportunities to go beyond our existing relationships primarily because university and school personnel were in the

building regularly, supporting ongoing conversations and potential interactions. Both authors taught in the building with another colleague, and all teacher candidates attended classes at the school at least twice a week. Our proximity created unique spaces for middle school students, their teachers and staff, teacher candidates taking courses in the building, university teacher educators, and the rest of the university to collaborate in new ways. These collaborations have not been without challenges, but they have created new ways of working to achieve our shared goals, including these two boundary-spanning experiences.

Our Investigation

We immersed teacher candidates in two experiences combined with a praxis inquiry model to see if this enabled them to make explicit links between practice and theory. The teacher candidates who participated in these experiences were enrolled in the second semester of their junior year in an Elementary/Middle Level Education program that requires at least two endorsements to teach middle school and a general middle-level education course. These candidates attended multiple teacher preparation courses at the university partnership school.

To better understand how theory and practice affected each other within a school-university partnership, we used the concept of praxis. Many people define the term praxis as integrating knowledge and action (theory and practice); however, it is much more than this. While the term praxis somewhat parallels current understandings of practice, a few distinctive features differentiate praxis from general understandings of practice. Specifically, theory and practice are integrated, and one does not hold greater value than the other (Carr, 1980). It is the place where words and actions, discourses and experience merge (Stacey, 2001). Praxis includes conscious reflection both on and in practice (Tarlier, 2005). Thus, praxis involves knowing, doing, and being. Using verbs is deliberate and indicates the dynamic character of praxis. Within the field of education, there are varied ways of knowing, doing, and being, and these *actions* are conveyed within specific historical, sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts. Praxis pedagogy is a powerful mode for transformative learning in teacher education (Kalantzis, 2006).

The praxis inquiry model provided a structure for reflection and response to boundary-spanning experiences in multiple ways. By definition, praxis pedagogy is derived from context and 'concrete structures' (Freire, 1972, p. 36). The praxis model is supported by eight pedagogies, including a portfolio dialogue connecting professional practice, repertoires of practice, teachers as researchers, participatory action research, case conferencing, community partnerships, and praxis learning (Arnold et al., 2014; Arnold et al., 2013). The student seminar and the bus tours incorporated dialogue connecting professional practice with community partnerships and praxis learning. Each activity was linked with the community, allowing teacher candidates to integrate identified culture and knowledge into curriculum and practice. They participated in a community of practice, discussing how to better support students through responsive learning environments, sharing descriptions and explanations, and theorizing possible changes in practice after reflection.

The Student Seminar

The student seminar was an event that was considered a part of the teacher candidates' field experience. This experience was inspired by reading an article about a similar experience conducted by another university. While teacher candidates get an opportunity to observe young adolescents in and outside of the classroom, candidates typically do not have the opportunity to hear directly from them about their lives and thoughts on schooling. This seminar provided an opportunity to better support the candidates' understanding of young adolescents and effective schooling for this unique age group, foregrounding the middle school students' voices.

After the initial units on young adolescent development and responsiveness, as well as the middle school philosophy, teacher candidates were required to write two to three questions that they would like answered by the middle school students. These questions were expected to demonstrate their understanding of both the young adolescent and effective middle schools. The questions were then categorized and combined as needed to limit them to a reasonable number for the time allotted for the event, one hour. Also, specific questions were omitted if they were too personal or too challenging for the partnership. For example,

the school used a computer program that students often did not like. The teacher candidates wanted to ask students about it, but we decided it would not have been a productive part of the conversation.

The middle school selected six students, three sixth and three seventh graders, to participate in the seminar. The middle school student panelists were provided with the questions in advance so that they would feel prepared for the experience. The middle school students were escorted to the university and sat in a panel in front of the teacher candidates. The students were informed that they were “our” teachers for this experience. They took this role seriously. The partnership coordinator helped to moderate the seminar. One limitation of this experience was that the school administration selected the students, and therefore, the panel of students was not always representative of the typical student body.

The Bus Tour

One challenge our teacher candidates face is the disconnect between their lived experiences and those of the students in our local community. While some of our candidates grew up in rural communities, their experience did not mirror that of the students in the school district where they completed many of their field experiences. One of the authors heard about a bus tour the school district provided for all new district employees to orient them to the local community and believed something similar would provide a meaningful experience for the teacher candidates and be an excellent opportunity for collaboration with the district. After discussing the opportunity with school district leaders, we worked with the district to arrange the tour. The school district views the bus tour as a way to recruit future teachers to the district and to highlight the resources and programs being offered to students in the district. The school district provided buses and lunch at a local school, and the district curriculum team helped to lead the discussion and narration of information about the community and the school district throughout the tour. The school district viewed this experience as an opportunity to recruit prospective teachers to stay in the district. For the teacher preparation program, the teacher candidates learned more about the local community and the students they often worked with. Therefore, this was a mutually beneficial experience. The bus tour was also

used as field experience hours, with an alternative assignment provided for those students with a class or other conflict that precluded their attendance because the tour lasted approximately 4.5 hours.

Candidate Experiences

To capture teacher candidates’ thoughts in response to each experience, we collected reflections and had them complete a survey. For the student seminar, teacher candidates were asked to describe what they observed, make two connections to content taught in middle-level education, and share a final reflection on how their participation in this experience would impact their future classroom practice. Additionally, at the end of the semester, in one of their four core classes, teacher candidates were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What is one thing that surprised you or was helpful to learn from the middle school students who participated in the student panel? How might you use that information as you enter the classroom?
- Thinking about what you learned in the seminar with invited guests (e.g., middle school students), how could you use what you learned in this seminar in your first teaching job? (The question initially asked about all seminars teacher candidates attended—there were four total, not including the bus tour—but we used the data for this seminar only during analysis.)

After completing the bus tour, the teacher candidates were also asked to complete a very brief survey on the experience. They were asked to rate the tour from 1 to 5 and whether they would recommend that we do it again. They were also asked to share the best thing about the tour, one thing they would suggest we do in the future, and the most important thing they took away from the experience.

In evaluating teacher candidate responses, it was apparent that both experiences were meaningful to them.

The Student Seminar

The student panel seminar is generally the most liked of the four seminars conducted during the teacher candidates’ “middle block” semester,

where they focus on the education of students in grades four through eight. Analysis of teacher candidates' reflections indicated they made significant connections to course content, especially with a general understanding of young adolescents. First, the teacher candidates identified the significance of relationships, focusing on everything from developing those relationships to the importance of care in the teacher-student relationship. Their responses included the importance of allowing students to be listened to and heard. Teacher candidates demonstrated an understanding that student voice was essential. Significant attention was also given to the wide variability of young adolescents. In particular, this emerged from teacher candidates' discussions about student preferences for group work and using technology. For example, one student stated:

Interestingly, they had different ways of working, and not all of them liked to work in groups. This was different from my point of view because I thought middle school students always loved group work, but in this seminar, I learned that every middle school student is different.

In the most recent seminar, this variance was again discussed in the teacher candidates' reflections.

Another interesting observation that the teacher candidates made centered around how observant the students were and how aware they were of teachers and teaching practices. For example, one student stated:

I was surprised by how much they noticed about the classroom. Sometimes, it's easy to think students don't know the work that a teacher puts in, but the students notice. As a teacher, I will work hard to care for my students and let them know they are heard and are an essential asset in the classroom.

The teacher candidates were surprised that the middle school students were so cognizant of teachers, their methods, and their interactions with students other than themselves. Candidates also noticed that the students enjoyed friendly competitions such as interdisciplinary team competitions. The role and importance of exploratory opportunities shared by the middle school students were also identified by teacher candidates as important and connected to their learning about effective middle schools. The

middle school these students attended offered extensive exploratories in sixth grade and narrowed the choices in seventh grade.

The Bus Tour

Overall, the teacher candidates rated the bus tour 4.69 out of 5, with less than 5 of 48 responses indicating a 3 out of 5, and none rated the experience below a 3. The teacher candidates appreciated learning about the nature of the school district, where, both in place and socio-economically, the students in the district came from, and the significant journey that the students from the outer areas of the county had to take to get to the Partnership School. One teacher candidate stated:

The most important thing that I took away from the tour was that you never truly know what a student has been through on their way to school or the night before, so it is important to think about why a student is acting out before you jump straight to yelling at them.

Another teacher candidate stated, "The most important thing I took away from the tour was the differences each child faces. You cannot try and understand a student until you know their situation and where they are coming from." Both teacher candidates centered their voices on students and their circumstances because of this experience, and they indicated that knowing students first was vital in teaching them and supporting learning. Another candidate said, "The best thing about the tour to me was all of the facts we were given. I was really surprised about some of the percentages." This candidate focused on data about the district, including demographics such as socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity in the community versus those of the school district because of the number of private schools in the area.

An impromptu part of the bus tour experience was a brief visit to one tiny rural elementary school in the district. This is the only K-5 school in the district and serves less than 200 students. After completing elementary school, these students attend the Partnership School for 6th and 7th grades which is 3.5 times larger. Teacher candidates left this campus with a better understanding of the significant distance students who attended this specific elementary school traveled to the middle school in this rural county and the transition the students faced as

they moved into middle school. For example, one exemplary comment from a teacher candidate was, “I loved the walkthrough of the [elementary school] and getting to see the school and the transition they face when coming to [the middle school].” This visit was a highlight for many teacher candidates.

Additionally, several teacher candidates stated that getting a broader perspective on the community and the school district was useful. Teacher candidates also offered helpful feedback for future tours. First, the teacher candidates wanted to see more of the “city” schools. Second, they wanted to see more of the community where most of the district’s students lived and visit some of those schools (there are only five other schools besides the one in the county that was visited).

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for Practice

We see both boundary-spanning experiences, bringing young adolescents and school district members in as partners and educators, as essential to the preparation of middle level educators. Teacher candidates found them to be valuable, as did the school district. These experiences deepened our relationships with district employees, reinforcing the school-university partnership, and continually provided learning experiences to support up-to-date understanding of young adolescents and the school district. However, we do see aspects of both the seminar and bus tour experiences that could be enhanced through additional praxis inquiry to be more effective.

- Seminar: A debrief of the seminar experience beyond the teacher candidates’ reflection is necessary to share a more global view and to reinforce the incredible variability in young adolescents’ interests, preferences, and beliefs. The responses to similar questions often varied significantly depending on the group of students selected for the panel.
- Bus tour: Centering teacher candidates and supporting an asset-based approach while addressing challenges faced by the students within the community is at the heart of what we do to better prepare teacher candidates. Despite being in a rural setting, our candidates often do not see the variability of school settings and community

characteristics that serve young adolescents, including the local fifth-grade school. For future tours, we have chosen to allot more time to visit a greater variety of neighborhoods and schools.

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