Schools as Clinics: Learning about Practice in Practice

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Abstract

The Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut is committed to the intentionality of interweaving course work and practice in its five-year teacher preparation program, the Integrated Bachelor’s and Master’s program (IB/M). It offers a wide range of field experiences to teacher candidates. Teacher candidates enter the program at the beginning of their junior year and complete the program after they finish their fifth year post-graduate master’s degree studies. This paper describes the program requirements and experiences. In essence, it intends to provide an illustration of the interwoven teacher education curriculum as promoted by Darling-Hammond and other scholars.
Isn’t it a pleasure to study and practice what you have learned?

--Confucius (551 B.C.-479 B.C., The Analects, 1.1)

Theoretical Framework

New teacher preparation may be the key to systematic reform in public schools (Branford, Darling-Hammond, LePage, 2005), which is why it is vitally important that an intentional approach be taken in the shaping and augmenting of future educators’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Further, Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, and Shulman (2005) report that, according to the National Research Council, a “key element for successful learning is the opportunity to apply what is being learned and refine it,” and teacher preparation is “learning about practice in practice.” Ball and Cohen (1999) also coined the process as “learning in and from practice.” Darling-Hammond (2006) suggests that strong teacher preparation programs have “a common clear vision of good teaching that permeates all course work and clinical experiences, creating a coherent set of learning experiences,” and they have an “extended clinical experiences … that are carefully chosen to support the ideas presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven course work.” The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) argued that teacher education must be “fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses.” The NCATE’s Blue Ribbon Commission (NCATE, 2010, p. ii) calls for a partnership between university-based teacher preparation programs and schools for a “shared decision making and oversight on candidate selection and completion.”
The Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut (the Neag School here and after) is committed to this kind of intentionality, which is why the Integrated Bachelor’s and Master’s program (IB/M) offers a wide range of field experiences to teacher candidates. Teacher candidates enter the program at the beginning of their junior year and complete the program after they finish their fifth year post-graduate master’s degree studies. This paper describes the program requirements and clinical experiences. In essence, it intends to provide an illustration of the interwoven teacher education curriculum as promoted by Darling-Hammond and other above-mentioned scholars.

**Partnership Infrastructure Fosters Intentionality**

Frequently, institutions of higher education and P–12 schools in the United States have collaborated to advance agendas of mutual interest. Such collaboration has been particularly noteworthy with the goal of preparing and sustaining professional educators. Holmes Group (1990), Clark (1999), and Darling-Hammond (1994) advocated for “Professional Development School” (PDS) for teacher preparation programs. These schools do not just provide field placements for teacher candidates, a rich and reciprocal relationship also develops the goal for simultaneous renewal of both the university and the public school for the sake of teacher candidates and K-12 students. Partnerships between teacher preparation programs and public schools are essential in providing contextual experiences for teacher candidates. The schools serve as the clinical sites where the theories and practical applications are visible and active. Without the opportunities schools provide to observe and practice teaching, the experiences of teacher candidates would be hypothetical and static.

The Neag School recognizes the importance of local schools in the process of preparing
future teachers. The Neag School currently partners with seven school districts, consisting of thirty-two schools, representative of suburban and urban centers. Every teacher candidate spends time in both suburban and urban districts during their three years in the IB/M program. In order to maintain the health of these partnerships and sustain simultaneous renewal, the Neag School has made a commitment to hiring four, fulltime clinical faculty, each with a terminal degree and a focus on the importance of the practitioner in the preparation of future teachers. One of the faculty members serves in the role of Director of School-University Partnerships, responsible for all functions in clinical settings and the oversight of corresponding seminar classes. The other three faculty members serve as Professional Development Center (PDC) coordinators. A PDC refers to a public school district, and within each district, the PDC coordinator acts as a liaison between individual Professional Development Schools and the University. All clinical faculty members teach the seminar classes that support the foundations of fieldwork and merge the theory and practice of teaching.

In addition to having “feet on the ground” in the public schools, it is important to maintain regular communication with public school officials in each of the seven Professional Development Centers. In 2010, the Schools as Clinics Committee (SaCC) was initiated and co-chaired by the Director of School-University Partnerships and one of the PDC coordinators. The committee’s purpose is to provide Professional Development School stakeholders with a forum for discussing diagnosis of candidate performances, identifying pertinent partnership issues, recommending policy, dialoguing about the continued improvement of the IB/M program and finding ways to promote simultaneous renewal, which is the ultimate goal of maintaining Professional Development Schools.
Since its inception, the Schools as Clinics Committee has used Professional Development School standards, generated by the Blue Ribbon Commission of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) and the nine essentials promoted by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (2009) to guide and assess where each school partner falls on a continuum of growth toward strengthening the partnerships that exist between the school districts and the Neag School of Education. This assessment process and subsequent data were used to develop a Memorandum of Understanding that binds both partners to an annual partnership commitment and the articulation of specific roles and responsibilities.

Other initiatives that have evolved out of the Schools as Clinics Committee include a co-teaching pilot in one of the Professional Development Secondary Schools, and a Lead Teacher/Site Coordinator role established in each of the thirty-two Professional Development Schools. Although both of these Schools as Clinics Committee initiatives provides solid evidence to support the fact that a foundation and an infrastructure are being created in order to promote simultaneous renewal between and among partnership schools and the university, in order for simultaneous renewal to continue to occur between and among partners, there must be trust. Open communication and a degree of transparency on the part of the university and public schools are necessary for long-term partnerships to thrive. It was in this spirit that a survey was developed and disseminated, in 2012, to the thirty-two Professional Development Schools that partner with the Neag School of Education. The purpose of the survey was to assess the extent to which simultaneous renewal is occurring in partnership schools.

Data indicate that, overall, school principals in P-12 partner schools believe that the mission statement developed by representatives from partnership schools is being fulfilled. Regarding educational practices and their impact on the total learning community, including P-
12 student learning, responses from partnership school principals ranged from generally positive to overwhelmingly positive. They also agreed that PDS participants’ practice explicitly focuses on providing improved and enhanced educational opportunities for all P-12 students, which is a salient goal of any credible teacher preparation program. Data from the survey, combined with some narrative offered by Neag School of Education’s clinical faculty and demographic information ascertained from the most recently available Connecticut Public School Strategic School Profiles (2009-2010), were used in this report in an effort to develop a baseline for helping the university assess, shape and augment life-giving interactions with school partners in the common mission of preparing tomorrow’s educators.

**Teachers Development Phases**

This section of the paper provides an overview of the program structure during teacher candidate’s three-years in the program. See Table 1. **Fall Semester Junior Year: Student as Learner**

Once accepted to the program, students begin their fall semester, junior year, with a six-hour per week clinical placement in either an urban or a special education setting in one of the seven Professional Development Centers (partnership school districts). The focus of the junior year in the IB/M program is that of Student as Learner. The seminar class that accompanies the clinical experience is designed to help teacher candidates merge the theory and practice of teaching and to introduce them to issues of social justice. Additionally, its purpose is to specifically support students as they participate and observe, for the very first time, in a special education setting or a content area/grade level in which they are pursuing certification. The