

## **Chapter 4 – Results**

### **Common Threads**

#### **Small Group Study**

An idea was judged to be a common thread if three or more of the six student teachers in the small group discussed the idea at length in their interviews. Although the student teachers naturally had extensive contact with each other, both at their host schools and in their university classes, it is doubtful that they discussed the interviews with each other. The recurrence of a line of thought in such a diverse group as this speaks to the importance of the concept to the student teaching experience. The common threads fell into three categories: the host school environment, the skills of a teacher, and opinions about preservice education.

#### **The Host School Environment**

In some cases, student teachers were assigned to the same host school, so it is perhaps not surprising that so many recurring themes involved elements of the host school itself. Still, the University used more than one host school, and the recurrence of some of these themes is notable.

**Unmotivated students** – The student teachers were all disappointed and somewhat surprised by the low level of motivation in so many of their students. The student teachers clearly saw the connection between low motivation and such academic ills as poor performance and disruptive behavior. Worse yet, they often say that many parents were as unmotivated as their children! Many left their student teaching experience still wondering how they would be able to motivate students as a full time teacher. Some seemed to relish the challenge, but others were so discouraged that they considered abandoning teaching careers.

James: It's like I said, it's a problem getting those kids motivated. I could see how it would wear a teacher down, in that situation, just because there are so many kids that don't want to be there, that are there. And it's just – Y'know, when you spend most of your time dealing with classroom management issues, the kids that want to be there suffer.

Lisa: I just... I'm not able to understand why they just feel like there's no future. I don't know if it's the future, or they think they just will carry on regardless of what they do. That's... I'm finding it really hard to relate to them right now. Really hard.

**Unhelpful host teacher** – Only one of the student teachers had what could be described as a positive experience with their host teacher. This mystified the student teachers (as well as the researcher), since the host teachers were all volunteers who were allegedly interested in training the next generation of teachers. With disturbing frequency the student teachers felt neglected and even abandoned by their host teachers. While none of the other student teachers had as horrible an experience as Derek had with his host teacher, many of the members of the small group had to stretch to find something positive to say about their host teachers.

Amy: I called my Dad and I said, "I can't take it anymore. It's just... It's just... She's just... I feel I'm being... I feel like I'm a slave." I really did.

Becky: I think a lot of people missed out because they were placed in a school that was diverse, but they had a crappy student teacher – er, cooperating teacher.

Derek: I've begged people to come and watch my guy teach: professors, grad students, other student teachers. One other student teacher did come in and watch him teach for an hour and she walked out saying, "I pity the kids and I pity you."

Joy: Uhh, he's given me a lot of anxiety over, like, leaving me alone a lot. Even after I was supposed to be done, like with my teaching, and my total teach, and things, he still, like, wouldn't come to class, or say, "Oh, I have to go do this." Run errands, and not come back... Kind of deserting me a lot.

Lisa: She's a great woman, but I don't think she's very supportive. I don't feel like she's even listening to me half the time when I say things. I feel like she's kind of reading something, and she'll look up and go, "Oh, what did you say?" Or something like that, and it's kind of like, okay... These teachers need to know that having a student teacher does not give them permission to take a two-month vacation.

**Poor facilities** – Most of the student teachers were dismayed by the poor facilities that they had to contend with at their host schools. This was especially true for the laboratory facilities: some student teachers did not even have laboratory tables, and none of them had the quality and quantity of laboratory equipment they had imagined during their preservice classes. Many expressed dismay at the fact that their preservice education emphasized discovery learning to such a high degree, but the poor facilities of a real classroom seemed to make application of discovery learning an almost insurmountable challenge.

**A feeling of being welcomed** – About half of the members of the small group felt welcomed by the faculty at their host schools. Even though their host teachers might not have been very helpful, these students reported forming collegial and even personal relationships with other faculty members. However, the other half of the group never felt like a part of the faculty, and reported that the teacher's lounges at their host schools were riven by office politics, gossip, and animosity.

**Unhelpful administration** – Most of the student teachers reported that administration was not providing adequate support to teachers at their host school. In

general, the student teachers found the members of administration to be distant and largely uninvolved. Often, they got a taste of the large load of administrative paperwork that is part and parcel of being a teacher. The student teachers expected that administration would assist them in maintaining discipline and creating a safe, productive classroom. However, in many cases administrators undermined both the student teachers and their host teachers in matters of discipline. While the members of the group found the occasional bright light among the administrative and support staffs at their host school, by and large they felt very much on their own.

Joy: And, um, basically, um, I've had some... discipline problems, and administration really doesn't back me up on anything. And I kind of get the feeling I'm discouraged from writing referrals or detention, so basically I think that, um, the discipline is just... there's not a lot of discipline in our school right now. (laughs)

**Students better than expected** – While all of the student teachers were dismayed to various degrees by the low levels of student motivation and student academic ability that they encountered, about half of them reported that their students were “good kids,” and did not exhibit as many discipline problems as rumors and stereotypes had led them to dread. These student teachers claimed that as some of their students had gotten to know them, the students had become more receptive to learning. None of the student teachers reported directly observing instances of violence, drugs, or other illegal activity, and there were few incidents of group members feeling seriously threatened by students.

### **The Skills of a Teacher**

**Caring** – All of the student teachers agreed that it was important that a teacher exhibit a caring attitude toward students. However, there was some variety in the definition of what it means to be “caring.” Some members of the small group believed that it was important to get to know the students as much as possible and show concern for their individual needs and situations. Others believed that caring was manifest in a

teacher that was always well-prepared and ready to work hard to help students learn. Many expressed an opinion that students can tell when a teacher does not care about teaching or about students, and that students might be more motivated to perform if they can tell that a teacher cares. Most agreed that teachers always have to walk a fine line between being too distant from students to maintain a connection, and getting too close to maintain discipline and respect. They felt that for the most part their preservice classes had warned them effectively about the need to walk the line, even if they had not received much guidance on exactly how to do so.

Amy: A lot kids out there have low, low, low self-esteem, and by you caring, and you telling them “You can do this. Hang in there.” If you show them that you care, then they’re going to care about themselves.

Derek: Because if you don’t go in with that attitude, then you’ll cut corners and you’ll take the easy way out and you won’t prepare a variety of activities and you won’t think about all the things you need to think about before and during teaching. And you won’t put your head down at the students’ level and think about the material as though you were seeing it for the first time. You won’t make as much of an effort. And if you don’t make an effort, your results won’t be as good.

James: I think you have to convince the kids that, uh, you’re there to help them, you’re not just there to get a paycheck. You’re there to help them succeed in school.

Joy: I mean from a teacher’s standpoint, I think caring for someone, you still have to have that boundary, where like you care for them, but, y’know, you still have to let them... Y’know, kind of separate yourself in a certain way from your students. And that’s doing them a favor... I mean, you wanna, you know, have... you know, your students obviously think that you care about them, and have, like, expectations for them, I think. You know, it definitely helps out their motivations,

but at the same time, you know, you're their teacher, so you can't get real involved in their personal lives or anything

Lisa: That's pretty much near the top, because I think that you know when you care, and they know when you don't care, and if you do care, I think that changes the feeling in the class 100%. Because they know when a teacher doesn't want to be there. Y'know, you'll hear them talking about this teacher and that teacher. They know when you don't care, it's just a job to you, so I think that's important. So, if they know that you really do care, somewhat, then I think they might try. But I don't know if that's true anymore, because I do care and they're not trying. So... I don't know.

**Classroom management** – This was an important issue to most of the student teachers. Many were concerned about potential problems with defiant students, and many were disheartened by the lack of administrative support in disciplinary matters that they had seen as student teachers. Some of them surprisingly received no assistance from their host teachers in classroom management matters, and some were even undermined by their host teachers! All acknowledged that some attempt was made in their preservice classes to simulate classroom management situations, primarily by means of “microteaching” role-playing sessions. However, some of them got little useful information from these sessions: in many cases it seemed too contrived to have fellow student teachers playing the roles, or the situations themselves seemed too extreme or unrealistic.

Becky: We mainly talked more about really severe cases, though, like a kid's threatening me with a knife, or something like that, you know? Um, which is obviously kind of unlikely. Um, I mean, yeah, it's good to be prepared, but still... Like, for instance, if someone were to tell me to shut up, or to call me a name or something, I wouldn't really know how to deal with that. That's the kind of stuff that I could see happening, 'cause I would just be like, “Oh, God, what am I supposed to do now?”

Derek: But, uh... but, uh, the ideal being that we read and talked about some theoretical, you know, models, and general approaches to classroom management, but it was very vague and sort of unreal, and more or less theoretical. Or at least that's how it came across. And I found that when I was in a situation, I did not have ammunition or training in how to effectively, you know, work my will. How to have the outcome be positive.

Lisa: But I don't think they prepared you for children that just... are outright defiant. I don't think you're ready for that. Or to have maybe a class of 35, that 20 are being defiant that day. It's like, what do you do?

**Organization** – Most of the student teachers felt that it was important for a teacher to possess advanced organizational skills. They noted that not only do teachers have to organize the day-to-day aspects of the learning process, but they must also look at the “big picture” of each semester. In some instances, the student teachers were assigned record-keeping duties by their host teachers, which provided first-hand experience in organizational matters. However, some were placed in a “sink-or-swim” situation with little advice or help from the host teacher. Some of the student teachers believed that their preservice classes helped them develop their organizational skills, either directly by providing guidance in creating lesson plans, or indirectly by placing so many demands on the student teachers' time that they had to become more organized just to survive.

**Content Knowledge** – A majority of the student teachers agreed that it is important that a science teacher possess extensive knowledge of science content. Some expressed concerns that they might not be able to keep current on scientific discoveries once they entered into full-time teaching, and that they might not be able to answer some student questions. A few decried the poor content knowledge of some of the teachers at their host schools.

Becky: From what I've heard... she doesn't have the content knowledge and... for some reason the kids just don't... Again, they tell me that she's a nice person; they just don't like her as a teacher. They aren't shy about telling their friends whether or not the class is worth taking.

Derek: Now, I still think that one of the biggest problems you have in the sciences is that you've got a lot of people teaching science who don't know very much about the particular subject they're teaching. Uh, and that affects their confidence. That affects their freedom to use different styles.

James: I think you also have to have a good grasp of your subject that you'll be teaching. Because if you don't have that, then basically you're acting. (laughs)

### **Opinions on preservice education**

**Good interactions with peers** – The student teachers were nearly unanimous in their praise of their cohort members. This cadre of student teachers represented a pool of experience that members of the small group found invaluable. They frequently looked to their peers for ideas, affirmation, and occasionally a shoulder to cry on. They found the in-class discussions about student teaching experiences to be especially useful, and most wished that their preservice professors had facilitated even more discussions. Even occasional digressions by student teachers who wanted to complain about personal situations did not significantly diminish the usefulness of the peer discussions. Most of the student teachers listed interaction with their fellow student teachers among the most helpful aspects of their preservice education, far above the actual classes.

James: Actually, I learned more from my other... the other future teachers than I did from any of the classes, so that was kind of valuable. But other sources... the classes themselves weren't that real helpful, but the interaction with other students were... was helpful.

Joy: I think that [Professor's] class would have been just as useful if we would have just gotten together for about an hour, and talked about our experiences, and what was going on. You know, just as much as... you know, doing like all these assignments and things that, like, you just don't really care about, and want to put much effort. You just want to get them done, because what you're really focusing on is your teaching.

**Not relevant to science teaching** – Most of the members of the small group felt that their preservice classes provided very little insight on how to deal with the unique challenges of teaching science. Many got the impression that professors of education held the philosophy that education classes should be “generic” in terms of academic discipline, attempting to convey universal principles of teaching. However, this approach left many of the student teachers feeling adrift, especially since few received significant discipline-specific attention from their host teachers. The student teachers were very focused on the specific demands they would be facing as science teachers, and less concerned with larger issues of teaching in general.

James: I really wish we could have had more with the teaching... how to actually teach science. You know, what different things... That was, um, some of the best ideas that we had was the actual...the methods class. I think if we had more classwork like that, you know, actually... “You should try this experiment for this,” you know. I... That really would have been helpful.

Joy: I mean, I'm sure the course helped me prepare in some ways, but... you know, not that much, because it wasn't, like, that experience-oriented. It was more like a lot of talking and just... you know, doing these little assignments here and there that, you know, you really have no connection with, in your mind, to any, like, experiences that you're having, you know? So since you're not making any of those connections – it's just in one ear and out the other – you have nothing to,

like, you know, apply it to. So it's just... that's why, like, people think it's a waste of time.

**More teaching experience needed** – Most of the student teachers were of the opinion that they could have benefited greatly by more experience working in a wider variety of classrooms. Some pointed out that they might have been able to get more out of their preservice classes with the experience of actual classroom work to inform their inquiry and provide them with context. The consensus was that no amount of coursework could be as useful as teaching experience, so the more teaching experience, the better. Some even proposed that prospective secondary school teachers should even teach outside their grade level, to see how earlier grades lay the foundation for students.

Amy: I personally think that they should have had us to teach more than one lesson during the observation semester. Um, I think that was great experience, and would have made us a lot less nervous for the first week or two during student teaching. So I think that we need to do it more than one time. I probably wouldn't have said that last semester, but I'm saying it this semester. (laughs)

Derek: So that could have – my preservice experience is very important to my preservice coursework. I would be more able to confront, discuss and ask the professors -- among other things, in classroom management. I would be able to more intelligently discuss with them the material they were trying to present, and maybe get some value of it if I'd had more real experience earlier on in the process.

**Education courses compare poorly to science content courses** – It was perhaps inevitable that the student teachers would compare their preservice courses to their undergraduate science content courses. For most of the members of the small group, the preservice classes suffered in the comparison. While most of the student teachers noted that the preservice classes were often work-intensive, none of them thought that their education classes were nearly as intellectually challenging as their science classes.

Science students (and science teachers) frequently thrive on challenge, and many require a challenge to remain engaged. The student teachers judged their preservice classes to be very easy; a frequent complaint was that much of the content of the classes was “common sense.” The members of the group also complained of massive redundancy in the content of their preservice classes, leading to very shallow treatments of topics that the student teachers would have liked to explore in more depth. The student teachers did not feel that they got very much useful information or good skills out of the time they invested in their preservice classes. They felt much more rewarded by their science content courses.

Becky: Um, and I think it's that feeling that, for most of the people in our science class, we were extremely frustrated, because we had been through... You know, most of the people in there have been through... the past two years were generally pretty tough, I think, and, for me, I don't do well in classes that aren't challenging. I tend to blow them off, and that happened in my education classes. I had no interest in doing any of that kind of stuff (laughs) because it was just so boring and easy, and it just seemed silly, y'know? I'm trying to think of an example of where it was helpful, and I'm having a hard time, if that gives you any idea.