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Best Practices in Educator Preparation

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Introduction

One of the themes emphasized in the College of Education (COE) Conceptual Framework is excellence in teaching. As defined in the Conceptual Framework, excellence in teaching embodies the use of best practices which embody a variety of educational ideas and activities that lead to improved student learning. The phrase "best practice" is used frequently in fields such as medicine or law to describe reputable work based on current research and employing the latest knowledge, technology, and procedures in the field (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). However, best practice in education has been somewhat difficult to define.

Research on Best Practices

For decades, much of the research on teaching and teacher education has focused on the question of teacher effectiveness (Swartz, 1996). Recommendations from a variety of national specialty associations call for teaching and learning environments that are student-centered, experiential, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging (Zemelman, et al., 1998). The Coalition of Essential Schools identified a similar set of principles that lead to improved student achievement. These principles included personalizing teaching and learning, emphasizing intellectual rigor, and promoting equity in achievement across student populations. The Coalition found that schools implementing these principles "improve school practice and raise student achievement" (Coalition of Essential Schools).

In an effort to synthesize the research and theory on teaching and learning, the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) identified five key standards for effective teaching: joint productive activity, language and literacy development, contextualizing teaching and learning, complex thinking, and instructional conversation (Dalton, 1998). These standards for effective teaching or best practice serve as the bases for a wide variety of instructional activities and strategies that promote active student learning. Tharp (1999) cites a number of research studies that have documented higher student achievement in classrooms emphasizing some or all of the five standards.

Best Practices in the College of Education

Drawing from the research on effective teaching, the COE has identified and implemented a variety of best practices in its educator preparation programs. These practices may also be applied in P-12 settings. The best practices described below are representative of the instructional strategies modeled by faculty in COE classrooms.

Collaboration/Social Interaction

Collaboration is a key component of some of the most effective social learning activities. Cooperative learning has proven to be an especially effective strategy for improving student learning when the activities incorporate positive interdependence, individual responsibility, group processing, social skills, and face-to-face interaction (Johnson et al., 1991; Sharan & Sharan, 1992; Slavin et al., 1985). In a comprehensive, longitudinal study of undergraduate college students, Astin (1993) suggested that cooperative learning may motivate students to put forth more effort and learn the course material in greater depth. For example, *think-pair-share* is a cooperative learning structure commonly used in university classrooms (Millis, 1991) in which students think about a problem or question, write down a response, pair up and discuss their responses, and then share with the entire class to stimulate discussion. Cooperative learning structures such as *think-pair-share* provide opportunities for students to interact with and learn from one another in a safe and comfortable learning environment.

Authentic Learning Experiences

Often, teachers simplify materials and activities to avoid overwhelming students with the complexity of real-life situations. Such activities tend to promote mechanical learning rather than high order thinking and reasoning, and students fail to see the purpose in them (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). On the other hand, authentic tasks and learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and meaningful to students can help them make meaning of the content (Dalton, 1998; Tharp, 1997). Authentic tasks are tangible, genuine, and connected to the real world (Zemelman, et al., 1998). Because teaching is a complex activity, learning experiences in teacher education programs in the COE focus as much as possible on authentic issues and problems encountered in P-12 education.

Reflective Teaching and Learning

Learning to learn is the essential aim of education (Dewey, 1944). When students have time to look back at what they have done and analyze their thought processes, learning is enhanced (Zemelman, et al., 1998). As students reflect on what they are learning and doing, they acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to assume responsibility for their own learning and become lifelong learners. Reflection is also important in teaching. Zeichner and Liston (1996) describe a reflective teacher as one who:

- examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice;
- is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching;
- is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches;
- takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and
- takes responsibility for his or her own professional development (p. 6).

Reflective teaching is integral to professional growth as teachers continue the process by which they acquire, develop, and refine the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to improve teaching and learning.

Teaching All Students

Because schools are becoming increasingly diverse, a significant role of educator preparation programs is to prepare candidates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to help all students learn. Zeichner (1993) identifies some key elements of effective diversity education in educator preparation programs. These elements include the following:

- Candidates develop a clear sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities.
- Candidates examine their attitudes toward other groups.
- Candidates acquire knowledge about the characteristics and learning styles of various groups and individuals.
- Candidates learn to use a variety of instructional strategies and adapt instruction to meet the needs of diverse students.

Preparing candidates to work in diverse settings is integral to the work of the College of Education as evidenced by the incorporation of these elements into its educator preparation programs.

The use of best practices, such as those described above, contributes to the positive learning environment in the College of Education. As teacher candidates see these practices modeled in their education courses, they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to implement these practices in their own P-12 classrooms. Ultimately, the result will be improved learning for all students.

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Dr. Gober is Associate Professor of Mathematics Education in the Department of Teacher Education at Columbus State University. Her current research interests include technology integration, equity, and teacher change.