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Facilitating Discussion of Theory and Practice in Education Seminars

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Abstract:

Field experience seminars, discussion-based courses paired with school-based practicum experiences, provide a space for teacher candidates to discuss the theories they study in their university classes and the practices they observe and implement in their school placements. This article describes an action research study that examines teaching techniques that promote discussion in English education seminar courses. The purpose of this research was to collaboratively develop teaching approaches that would help teacher candidates bridge ideas about theory and practice in their development as aspiring teachers. The conversations that challenged the teacher candidates to think critically and theoretically about their classrooms were transformative moments in our seminar classes.

Introduction

The deep divide between content knowledge and pedagogy that occurs in many teacher preparation programs is well documented in teacher education research (Zeichner, 2010; Ball, 2000). Ideally, teacher preparation programs create a synergy between theory and practice (Zeichner, 2010) and exist as “new hybrid spaces where academic, practitioner, and community-based knowledge respect and interact to develop new solutions to the complicated process of preparing teachers,” (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016, p. 428). Zeichner (2010) explains “one of the central problems that has plagued college- and university-based preservice teacher education for many years” is the “disconnect between the campus and school-based components of programs” (p. 89). Ball (2000) identified three problems that teacher education programs must address in order to bridge this divide: “The first problem concerns identifying the content

knowledge that matters for teaching, the second regards understanding how such knowledge needs to be held, and the third centers on what it takes to use such knowledge in practice” (p. 244). Given the siloed nature of content departments and university pedagogy courses, achieving a more integrated model of teacher preparation is no easy feat (Ball, 2000). Traditional teacher preparation programs like ours, which have not yet found a way to achieve a more integrated model, have created programs that consist of methods classes grounded in studying education theory, field experiences designed to give teacher candidates spaces to practice pedagogies with actual students, and seminar courses focused on helping teacher candidates to bridge the theory/practice divide. As teacher educators, we know the importance of the seminar course, which led us to the following research question: How can we structure the seminar so it brings together theory and practice?

We see our seminars as a place of opportunity where we can help the teacher candidates to look at their practice in new ways they may not have considered. We can also help them work through the questions that arise in their field experiences in a way that is immediately useful to their work in the schools. We see our seminar classes as opportunities to more deeply understand the complexities of teaching in a way that is “powerful enough to enable candidates to build upon and extend their prior knowledge and experiences to accomplish the goal of competent teaching” (Hollins & Crockett, 2012, p. 8). The seminars can both build teacher candidates’ confidence and encourage revision of, and reflection on, their developing teacher identities. We want to make sure our teacher candidates feel confident and well-prepared for the situations they will

encounter, but we also want them to think critically about their teaching and make decisions based on their understandings of how and why those choices work and what the consequences might be. We want them to think through possibilities for their practice as a way of understanding their questions rather than only having a playbook of answers to problems that come up. Thus, we began a collaborative action research project to explore our teaching in our individual field experience seminars to develop practices that would promote productive conversations about teaching with our teacher candidates. Our hope is that other teacher educators can learn from our action research process and the teaching approaches that we tried in experimenting with our seminars.

Context

The data from this study came from two universities (all names are pseudonyms). Site 1, River City University (RCU) is a mid-sized public university with a total enrollment hovering around 25,000 students (River City University, 2015). Site 2, Mountain View University (MVU) is a mid-sized, public university enrolling approximately 13,000 students (Mountain View University, 2015). These two predominantly white universities are located in different parts of the country, but they share a similar seminar-style course for teacher candidates. The seminar courses, which meet once a week for 50-90 minutes, are designed to foster reflective practice and to prepare teacher candidates for English education field experiences (practicum teaching) in grades 5-12. Both seminars are held concurrently with field experiences for the teacher candidates; teacher candidates spend part of their semester in an English language arts classroom in a local or surrounding community. The seminars take place on the university campuses.

As a collaborative action research study, both co-authors of this article studied our teaching practices and experiences in leading these seminar courses. Both the seminar course at RCU and MVU used the text *You've Got to Reach Them to Teach Them* by Mary Kim Schreck. This text discusses elements of student engagement through chapters such as, "Relationships," "Motivation," and "Confidence." Each week teacher candidates read chapters from the text and discussed them in class. The chapter topics served as the springboard for group discussion.

Methodology

Because we were teaching similar seminar courses for English education majors in similar university settings, we saw an opportunity to collaboratively examine our practices and to implement new teaching approaches that would help us become better seminar professors. In order to evaluate our effectiveness as teachers, we took several different perspectives into account. We certainly wanted the seminar to be a productive and supportive space for the teacher candidates to get feedback and inspiration about their teaching practices. We also wanted the seminar to provide a space for us, as teacher educators and field experience supervisors, to encourage teacher candidates to think about the multiple possibilities for their teaching choices and to recognize the complexity of the work they were doing in classrooms. With this dual purpose in mind, we chose teaching approaches that we hoped would accomplish these goals and work within the broader context of helping teacher candidates develop as teachers.

We conceptualized our study as an action research study. We wanted to study our own teaching practices "in order to better understand them and to be

able to improve [our] quality or effectiveness” (Mertler, 2014, p. 4). We also wanted to be able to implement changes to our practice immediately and analyze results as they happened. Thus, we followed Stringer’s (2007) Action Research Interacting Spiral to structure our inquiry (as cited in Mertler, 2014). In this model, we repeatedly looked at the data in the form of anecdotes from our teaching, thought about what was going on in each of the anecdotes, and acted on our new understandings to implement changes to our teaching. We followed Patterson, Baldwin, Araujo, Shearer, and Stewart’s (2010) suggestions to see our action research as part of a larger ecology for the teacher candidates’ development as teachers:

As agents in complex adaptive systems (or teaching/learning ecologies), we should engage in continuous, recursive ‘Look, Think, Act’ cycles to ensure that the system adapts to changes within and changes in the environment but also that these adaptations are coherent with our shared values, beliefs, goals, and expectations. (p. 147)

Each time we met for our research meetings, we discussed our previous seminar class and revisited previous concerns in light of the techniques we had tried. Then we repeated the process of examining anecdotes from our teaching and developing new teaching approaches.

The data for this study come from a virtual online action research group. We met weekly via online video conferencing (Google Hangouts) to debrief on our recent class sessions. During these meetings, we each took turns sharing challenges, successes, and anecdotes from our teaching. We discussed our teaching practices and our observations of seminar meetings with the teacher

candidates. At the end of each meeting, we wrote notes in a shared Google Doc to capture our thinking. Here is a sample of our meeting notes from March 18. Note that we refer to the teacher candidates as “students” in our seminar classes:

Jess: I am feeling a disconnect between me choosing topics for discussion and holding a discussion about students’ practical concerns. We [Bailey and Jess] talked about several possible solutions: Could we structure the seminar around some big projects? Another solution we talked about [in our action research group] is giving students something a bit more concrete to spark their discussions. For example, this week in class I gave students a list of qualities of effective teachers and asked each student to choose the one quality they felt most confident about in their teaching.

This was a very valuable discussion because they had a list to choose from. Students also had to give an example of how they demonstrate that quality. At the end, they had to choose a second quality that they did not feel so confident about and this week they have to talk to their cooperating teachers about some strategies to become more confident in that area.

Bailey: Another possible solution is one that I tried. Each student is in charge of leading the seminar discussion for about 20 minutes. The discussion leader chooses the topic and has to begin with something (video, short article, etc.) to kick off the discussion. The first one was about music in the classroom and the second one was about how (if) textbooks are used in the classroom. I’ve wondered if these discussions are worthwhile. Are these topics a good use of time because they engage the concerns that students actually have right now?

Capturing our conversations in a shared file allowed us to return to our data frequently to assess our progress in alleviating the tensions we had identified and examine the effectiveness of our teaching techniques. Our research notes also allowed us to return to the bigger picture and overarching questions of our action research project rather than simply planning for each seminar meeting. We found our notes crucial for enacting the recursive “Look, Think, Act” cycles.

We used a two-part process for our data analysis procedures. During the course of data collection, we were constantly analyzing our data and weekly notes so that we could implement changes in our seminar for the next week. We noticed that we returned to the same set of three concerns as we made changes to our teaching. Working through these concerns in our research discussions and seminar-planning time formed the core of our action research process. We worked recursively in a process of noticing aspects of our teaching, forming a plan to address our shared concerns or ideas, enacting those plans in our individual seminars, and revising our teaching based on our experiences. We used our time together to develop new teaching approaches and methods for supporting our teacher candidates’ development and facilitate meaningful discussions.

Following the semester and the completion of our data collection process, we began a more formal process of organizing and sorting our field notes into coded chunks using words and phrases from our notes. For example, some of our initial codes were “fostering reflective practitioners,” “course structure,” “fostering productive discussions,” and “ideas/successes.” Using those

reorganized field notes, we began to write memos about the connections among different experiences in and reflections on the seminar course meetings.

Reflecting on the Themes

In our experiences with the reflective seminar, we had a number of questions about how to balance what the teacher candidates wanted and expected to get from the seminar and what we as instructors wanted and expected. Throughout our weekly research meetings, we noticed that we were constantly in a state of revision of our teaching practices. We would notice a question, and we worked together to develop possible ways to address it. We returned to previous questions recursively and evaluated our teaching in light of our progress with the teacher candidates in addressing our questions. Throughout our research process, we returned to a common difficulty of bridging theory and practice effectively with students. We developed three different ways of looking at this challenge in order to improve our teaching. The three lenses we used to think about the theory/practice divide were: 1) The tension between our urging teacher candidates to be student-centered in their teaching while we wondered if we were being student-centered enough in ours, 2) The tension we felt as instructors regarding how much to shape the seminar dialogue, and 3) The tension between troubleshooting problems that arose in the field experiences and envisioning many possible solutions for future teaching contexts.

Being Student-Centered

Through our analysis of our action research data, we realized that an interesting theme was that we encouraged the teacher candidates to be student-centered even as we thought about the question of how to be student-centered in

our own teaching. When we think about designing a student-centered classroom, we see “the role of the teacher [...] is that of facilitator, helper, and partner in the learning process” (Elias & Merriam, 1984, p. 125). We both wanted to let the teacher candidates’ needs and interests guide the content of the seminars so that they felt they were getting what they needed to become effective teachers, and we wanted to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to consider things that they did not yet know to think about. We found that sometimes instead of providing a direct answer to their questions, we responded with further questions to get the teacher candidates thinking about the environment, the context of the problem, and larger structures at play.

Shaping the Discussions

As teacher educators, we shared an interest in providing safe spaces for teacher candidates to openly discuss the challenges and successes that arose in their field experiences. The seminars provided an open forum for teacher candidates to explore possibilities for their teaching practices while also having specific students, classrooms, and concerns in mind. We knew that we could shape how teacher candidates made sense of what they were encountering for the first time in their teaching. However, our research meetings frequently revolved around the question of what our role should be in shaping candidates’ conversations in the seminar. We wondered how much we should guide the conversations in one direction or another. Did we want our seminars to be truly open to focus on the candidates’ questions, or did we want to provide some structure for their thinking and responding?

Troubleshooting vs. Envisioning

In our third lens for examining the theory/practice divide, we often wondered how much to balance seminar time between troubleshooting problems that the candidates encountered and envisioning multiple solutions that looked beyond particular present circumstances. The seminar provided an opportunity to help teacher candidates recognize understandings about students, teaching, and themselves as they addressed challenges that came up in their field experiences. It was not uncommon for teacher candidates to express the concern that a focus on theory in their college courses had not fully prepared them to know what to do in the day-to-day reality of their classrooms. We found that our teacher candidates wanted specific lesson plans, ideas, or activities to use tomorrow in class. They wanted troubleshooting and we wanted philosophizing, theorizing, and big-picture planning. They seemed to want to use their experiences to fix particular problems and we wanted to use their experiences to speak to the nature of teaching and education. As teacher educators, we believe that knowing “what” to do (activities, planning, management, etc.) is strengthened when we know “why” we are making those choices. How do we find the balance?

All three of these theory-practice lenses related to how we could help teacher candidates think reflectively in order to make their future practice better rather than how to “fix” the one lesson in isolation. In Peter Johnston’s (2004) book *Choice Words*, he described the ways teachers work toward building students’ identity and agency through the language teachers use with students. It is not only about choosing the right words; it is about considering larger goals for students’ development. We wanted our teacher candidates to emulate the

teachers Johnston described in *Choice Words*. Through examples of classroom talk between teachers and students, Johnston depicted that teachers choose language that fits within a larger goal for their teaching and for their students. The teachers did not merely “deal with the immediate situation” (p 85). Instead the teachers were “dealing with the immediate situation within a larger frame of reference--an activity and goal structure that saturate [their] language choices” (p 85). They made choices that fit within their larger goals. Like Johnston recommends, we wondered how we could help teacher candidates “deal with the immediate situation within a larger frame of reference” (p. 85). Did we structure seminars to show teacher candidates that their questions represent opportunities to think bigger about their larger goals while also addressing their immediate needs? And, maybe more importantly, how could we get teacher candidates to bridge the gap between talking about possibilities and actually enacting those possibilities in their teaching? We wanted our teacher candidates to think of the multitude of possibilities rather than choose the “best” way to solve a problem.

In order to address the theory-practice divide in the seminars, we developed a number of new teaching approaches that we tried in our classes and then continued to reflect on in our research meetings using the “Look, Think, Act” cycle.

Results of Our Collaboration

Through our ongoing conversations, we implemented new ideas for engaging teacher candidates that we hoped would holistically incorporate theory and practice. We wanted to find a way to give the teacher candidates what they wanted while also giving them what we thought they needed (categories that

often overlapped). We made these curricular changes with our overall goals in mind of supporting teacher candidates' development as thoughtful, critical, and reflective English teachers. The following teaching approaches are some of the results of our collaboration. We describe individual activities and how we implemented them.

Weekly Challenges

We issued weekly challenges related to the chapters for each week from the course text *You've Got to Reach Them to Teach Them* (Schreck, 2011). For example, one week the chapter on motivation discussed Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), so the challenge of the week was to notice when students were in states of complete engagement and focus in the classroom. In our action research notes, we noted that the teacher candidates reported their observations back to the seminar group the following week, saying that the middle and high school students seemed to be in states of flow when they were engaged in group discussion about a topic that interested them or when they were writing creatively. In our seminar meeting, the teacher candidates analyzed what commonalities they noticed in these classroom observations. Most of the activities the teacher candidates mentioned involved some elements of student choice or students actively producing or participating. We hoped that this challenge helped the teacher candidates to shape their future lesson planning to include more opportunities for students to engage in states of flow. The weekly challenges were a productive way to tie the weekly reading into the teacher candidates' experiences in their classrooms, uniting theory and practice.

Sometimes our seminar conversations around the weekly challenges took the form of troubleshooting candidates' questions and concerns and allowed them to get answers to their practical questions about their teaching. Other times, conversations that began practically transformed into conversations about teaching theories and philosophies. For example, in a seminar discussion about classroom environment at MVU, the focus of the conversation shifted dramatically. The seminar began with teacher candidates sharing pictures of their classrooms and discussing what makes an effective and safe learning environment. The teacher candidates shared strategies they had discussed in methods classes and with their cooperating teachers. As we talked about these suggested strategies, the teacher candidates spoke with conviction about the importance of not allowing students to bully one another in classes so that everyone could share their opinions freely, a topic they had discussed often in their methods classes. This led to a more abstract discussion of the forms that bullying might take, the ways that teachers passively bully their students when they do not intercede in bullying events, and the importance of being an ally for students who are traditionally marginalized in school settings. Through this conversation, the teacher candidates were able to not only think about ways to create safe and effective learning environments; they were also able to think about the bigger picture of systems and situations that make schools unsafe for students. Thus, the teacher candidates developed a more specific context for the strategies that they had seen in classrooms and discussed in methods courses.

The fact that this conversation arose from a seemingly simple prompt about classroom environment shows one way that we attempted to unite theory

with practice. While the teacher candidates had discussed how to build safe classroom environments in their methods classes, they had not yet had the practical experience to know how classrooms might become unsafe for some students. Providing practical examples from our own practice provided opportunities to have a more in-depth conversation about how their theoretical plans could play out in actual classrooms. In this and other cases, the weekly challenges created a space for conversations to move between their field experiences, their methods classes, and their educational philosophies.

Discussion Leaders

In order to provide teacher candidates with a structured way to shape our weekly discussions, we developed a class assignment that asked the teacher candidates to become discussion leaders. Each class session, one teacher candidate was in charge of leading the seminar discussion about a topic of their choice for 20 minutes. In class the discussion leader shared some background information (a video clip, a short article, etc.) and asked open-ended questions to begin the discussion. One teacher candidate at RCU led a discussion about using music in the classroom to engage students. He discussed how many of his students were better able to focus when he played non-lyrical music by Ratatat, a Brooklyn-based electronic rock duo. After hearing a short clip from the band, many of the other teacher candidates in the group expressed desire to use Ratatat in their classrooms. Then the conversation moved to ways in which each teacher candidate had used music or would like to use music in their lessons and the ways in which this could be beneficial to students.

The teacher candidate-led seminar discussions gave the teacher candidates agency in selecting a topic that was particularly important to them and relevant to their classrooms. The topics included new or creative teaching ideas that the teacher candidates were excited to share with their peers. For the discussion leaders, these conversations were opportunities to see themselves as experts about teaching practices. For their peers, these discussions encouraged innovation and sparked new ideas. Other times the discussion leaders' topics were related to areas of concern for the teacher candidates and allowed them a forum to work through their understandings of practices that seemed inconsistent with their developing ideas about teaching. In both cases, having a discussion leader format helped to make our seminars more student-centered and helped all of us to focus on the particular points of concern and celebration for the teacher candidates.

Pass It on at School

The book *Pass It on at School* by Jeanne Engelmann (2003) discusses 40 developmental assets that “can lead to the healthy development of all young people” (p. xiii), such as creating a caring school climate, establishing student engagement in school, reading for pleasure, and cultivating a culture of high expectations. In addition to describing these assets and explaining the value of focusing on these assets in a school, Engelmann also provides strategies for every member of a school community to get involved in developing these assets, including guidance counselors, bus drivers, custodial staff, administrators, nurses, coaches, and others.

Though we did not read the entire book in the seminar, the teacher candidates reviewed the 40 developmental assets and picked three assets to promote in their schools. Then they identified specific action steps for how they could promote the assets with students in their classroom throughout the following week. This process of identifying action steps helped the teacher candidates to feel that they had agency and impact in a student teaching situation where many did not have input for major decisions in the classroom, such as which (if any) texts to use or how to assess student learning. The teacher candidates could, however, promote a caring school climate by greeting students at the door each day and making an effort to connect with a different student each class period about their interests.

Using the *Pass It On at School* asset model that involves stakeholders throughout the school community often led to valuable conversations about what a community-centered view of schools could look like in practice. In these conversations, the teacher candidates began to develop an understanding that people in the community could provide support for teachers' work in the classroom. In our formative seminar evaluations, students often noted the *Pass It On at School* activity as a transformative part of the class. They appreciated the focus on creating their own plan for developing concrete actions to implement in their classrooms. We appreciated that the actions the teacher candidates planned to take were rooted in a larger perspective of healthy development of young people.

Videos of Teachers

We found that teacher candidates gained deep insights when they were able to watch videos of experienced teachers. Even though our teacher candidates had observation hours in classrooms before they participated in our seminar, these observations were rarely guided. In our seminars, we watched short video clips of teachers facilitating lessons in their classrooms. We used the videos to help the teacher candidates learn how to observe and to see how teachers' instructional choices influence student outcomes. As teacher candidates watched videos of teachers in action, we asked them to watch for the following questions:

- What do students say?
- What does the teacher say?
- What movements, actions, or facial expressions do you notice, and what insight do those nonverbal cues provide about student learning?
- What might have happened if the teacher had done this differently?

We took our inspiration for these questions from Sarah Brown Wessling's (2014) Teaching Channel blog post "An Observation Challenge."

The Teaching Channel website (www.teachingchannel.org) has over 1,000 short clips (ranging from about 1-15 minutes) that are searchable by subject, grade, and topic. The Annenberg Learner site (www.learner.org) also houses numerous video workshops featuring excellent teaching practices. These videos provided new teaching ideas in addition to showing teacher candidates examples of effective instruction. For example, we showed English teacher candidates a Teaching Channel video of Sarah Brown Wessling (2017) titled "Creating Found Poems," and then we discussed what choices Brown Wessling made in planning and facilitating the lesson that led to student engagement. Having the ability to

rewind and pause the videos of actual teaching allowed us to pinpoint steps in the process where teacher candidates could reflect on choices that the model teachers made.

Reflective Sentence Starters

Sometimes we directed the teacher candidates' thinking and conversation in a particular way with sentence starters. In a sentence starter prompt, we provided the first part of the sentence and teacher candidates completed the thought with their own ideas. After responding to the sentence starters in writing, the teacher candidates shared their thinking verbally in response to the prompts. We chose sentence starters based on the day's topic, and we encouraged reflection by phrasing the sentence starters as "I" statements, such as, "I will know I've created a safe classroom environment when..." Reflective sentence starters kept our conversations grounded in the teacher candidates' experiences as well as the day's topic.

Teaching Scenarios

Like the teacher candidates, we know that our growth as teacher educators is never finished; we are always in the process of becoming better educators. Our "Look, Think, Act" cycle is still continuing as we teach new teacher candidates in similar courses. With that in mind, the next time we teach a seminar course, we have other approaches that we would like to try in effort to support the teacher candidates. For example, we would like to include reading and discussing teaching scenarios. We think that reading prepared teaching scenarios might offer ways for our discussions to focus on multiple possibilities for teaching choices while also grounding those choices in actual teaching examples. We could

select (or write) teaching scenarios that would spark discussion of topics that we value as teacher educators, such as teaching for social justice. In an English education seminar, *In Case You Teach English* by Larry Johannessen and Thomas McCann (2002) could provide multiple scenarios designed to start a discussion. Providing a combination of hypothetical but realistic scenarios with the teacher candidates' own classroom experiences will enmesh theory and practice in our seminar discussions and help teacher candidates use theory-based practice in their teaching.

Conclusion

In an ideal teacher preparation program, there is no separation between teacher candidates' seminars and their field experiences. Teacher preparation programs that consciously and specifically locate teacher preparation within schools and communities allow teacher candidates to see their roles as teachers fully entwined with the goals of a community and school (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016). However, until more teacher preparation programs make the change to more embedded preparation, we can work to unite theory and practice within the existing structure of our universities.

Our main goal for our field experience seminars was to help teacher candidates bring together the theories they were studying in their university classes and the practices they were observing and implementing in their school placements. We collaboratively implemented a variety of pedagogies in our seminar classes through our recursive "Look, Think, Act" cycles in order to move us closer to that goal. Although we had success in implementing these practices in

our seminars, we acknowledge that different classes have different needs and instructors have different styles.

The conversations that challenged the teacher candidates to think critically and theoretically about their classrooms were transformative moments in our seminar classes. Through the conversations, the teacher candidates were able to:

- experiment with language that they might use with students,
- talk through the ways that one teaching strategy might benefit or hinder their teaching philosophies, and
- imagine the possible outcomes of various teaching dilemmas.

The teacher candidates envisioned how ideas they had discussed in methods classes looked in practice with particular student personalities and needs that they noticed in their field experience classrooms. Because of these conversations, the teacher candidates could adjust their teaching goals and philosophies with a group of supportive peers. As teacher educators, we deeply valued these critical conversations. Through our action research process, we came to more fully understand the power of the conversations we have with teacher candidates, and the reflective discussion tools help start those conversations.

In addition to proliferating teaching ideas for our seminars, our action research also led us to be more prepared as teacher educators to facilitate difficult, transformative discussions. Because we talked weekly about our teaching, we were able to exchange ideas with one another and suggest new approaches that we might not have considered if we were not reflecting together. In other words, our professional conversations enabled us to develop our own teaching identities in the ways that we hoped our teacher candidates would

develop theirs. We were able to work together to address teacher candidates' immediate needs while remaining "coherent with our shared values, beliefs, goals, and expectations" (Patterson, Baldwin, Araujo, Shearer, & Stewart, 2010).

Through our willingness to examine our own teaching and to try new pedagogical approaches in our seminars, we were better able to recognize and appreciate the teacher candidates' efforts to do the same in their teaching. We wanted to encourage the teacher candidates to be open to trying new approaches in their teaching while also clarifying their visions for themselves as teachers. This process mirrored our shared reflections and research collaborations as teacher educators. Our action research process helped us to meet the needs of the teacher candidates and ground our practices in theory. In this way, we connected theory with practice for ourselves while seeking new ways to do the same for our teacher candidates.

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