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Mentoring Education: An Interview with Carolyn M. Evertson

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Carolyn M. Evertson will be a featured speaker at the 1996 annual meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association. In this brief interview she discusses teacher education, educational research and policy, mentoring , and teachers and classrooms.

Carolyn M. Evertson is Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. She was named Harvie Branscomb Distinguished Professsor in 1992. She has published numerous books, chapters, and articles about teacher education, learning to teach, managing learning environments, and the culture of the classroom. Her texts, Classroom management for elementary teachers and Classroom Management for Secondary Teachers, (co-authored with Edmund Emmer, Barbara Clements, and Murray Worsham) are soon to be published in their fourth editions.

MWER: What do you see as major issues facing teacher education today?

CME: One of the issues facing any institution that is preparing professionals, regardless of whether that profession is teaching or not, is the bridge between the discourse communities in which the preparation takes place, and there may be more than one, and the discourse communities of the workplace. It is that gap between where the professional receives this initial introduction or grounding and where they apply what they learn. This issue has been enduring. To the extent that we can even recognize the separation and try to address it, we make progress. It comes down to learning to understand these worlds from multiple perspectives.

MWER: It sounds like you have some question as to whether or not universities are the best place for teacher education.

CME: I don't have any doubt that they are. However forging these links with the world of practice is a tough job for universities or any teacher preparation institution largely because of the conflicting incentive systems and values within those institutions with those of our system of public education. Unless we can broaden our understanding of what constitutes scholarship, much of the work done in teacher preparation will go unacknowleged and misunderstood.

MWER: How can that be changed?

CME: One way is in the way we describe what we do. I don't think we talk about it very well, nor are we able to create the vivid images that communicate to the lay person who has a stake in education. Second, I would work hard within colleges and universities to broaden the definition of research and scholarly productivity. The late Ernest Boyer argued that the scholarship of application has too often been defined strictly as service and has been discounted as a legitimate research activity; nevertheless, this type of scholarship asks the question, "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?" What people tend to forget is that many of our great universities were founded on the principle that higher education must serve the interests of the larger community. We have gotten away from this basic principle, I think. Those hired to work with schools generally have not had their work respected.

MWER: Unless you get it published.

CME: You can often get it published, but you have to frame it in a way that makes the article look like it contributes to the scholarship of discovery or integration. The trick will be to broaden the definition of legitimate research to include the scholarship of application in its own right.

MWER: What trends do you see in education that should be of concern?

CME: Our tendency is to prescribe simple solutions to complex problems. There is also the tendency to endorse or attack labels such as "whole language," "character education," or "outcome-based-education" without accurately representing the principles behind them. Often these attacks on educational practices are convenient ways of gaining an audience for another agenda.

MWER: Why don't legislators and policy-makers pay more attention to educational researchers?

CME: I think it's because we are seen as irrelevant. A great deal of the policy governing teachers and teacher preparation is made by policy-makers who have their own experiences with public school education and their own anecdotal evidence; sometimes that is not positive. Nevertheless, we all have a stake in our schools and the people who work in them, but we all have different ideas about what it will take to fix them. Many people's images of schools are drawn from what it was like when they were students.

MWER: Anita Woolfolk described a presentation in which she gave a great deal of educational research that supported a particular approach and had one person raise a hand and erase all of that by telling a contradicting personal experience. Berliner has said the same thing about the power of stories. That is exactly what you are saying about policy-makers. That goes along with your changing the notion of what research is, because in order to get that kind of anecdotal information out it has to be considered part of research.

CME: Policy-makers have heard plenty of negative personal stories. The positive stories are too often buried in journals that are not easily accessible.

MWER: We also have a tendency to avoid overstating our case and we appear very wishy-washy even about the things that we are pretty sure about. We always include a postscript of "but more research is needed." Policy-makers say, "Well, if more research is needed, do the research and come back and tell us when you know something."

CME: Yes, and that is a very pragmatic attitude for them to assume. I don't see it changing for a while.

MWER: How do philosophies and approaches like the radical constructivist movement (with no objective reality), play to these people?

CME: Again, here is the problem of labels and images. The basic question for most citizens and parents is, "OK, but will they learn the multiplication tables?"

MWER: You seem to be in touch with the needs of teachers.

CME: I've seen that we can make lives better for teachers, kids, and parents. I have seen it happen. But we all need to keep the lines of communication open.

MWER: What has the expert/novice research contributed to our understanding of effective teaching?

CME: One of the real contributions of this line of research was to underscore the developmental nature of learning to teach. We had unrealistic expectations of new teachers, namely that they would emerge from their teacher preparation with everything they needed to be good teachers. I think we know now how naive that was. The expert/novice work has helped to provide a theoretically important base for continuing professional development.

MWER: Your mentoring work speaks to this development. What makes a good mentor?

CME: The idea of mentoring or being mentored is something everyone likes. It is intuitively appealing; we would all like to have a close friend and knowledgable supporter when we are learning something new. Nevertheless, just because it is a good thing to do doesn't mean that experienced teachers know how to do this. Teaching another adult or being a support for another adult requires other skills that may be different from those used in teaching a classroom of children. Just because one is experienced does not necessarily mean one will be a good mentor. We have found that there are some attributes, however, such as the ability to take the perspective of another, the ability to listen, and to put aside personal biases so that the other person can articulate and pursue his or her own questions. These things are often hard for us to do, especially if we have a lot of experience in an area.

MWER: What would you see as the key for beginning teachers to be successful?

CME: To have local support within the school community; not just by word but by action. This has to be more than informal support by a few kind teachers or administrators. There needs to be a common value within the faculty that says, "It is important to support the beginning teacher in the workplace."

MWER: In a recent article (Randolph & Evertson, 1994), you described the changes in the nature of classroom management associated with moving conceptually from work-oriented to more learning-oriented classrooms. Can you give some specific examples of changes you see in classroom management?

CME: I think there are changes in the way we are thinking about classroom management. This is in part due to the emphasis on teaching for understanding and the reemphasis on the student being at the center of learning in the classroom. The questions become involved with how we as teachers orchestrate the activities in classrooms in ways that support learning, and what roles and responsibilities do teachers and students assume. For a long time, classroom management has been and still is associated with control and discipline, and with questions about the best ways to get students to comply. We are simply saying

sponses was celebrating special events or holidays (such as Black History month or religious holidays) with field trips, guest speakers, and festivals. The remaining responses, which were all in single digit percentages, were bilingual education programs, establishing a positive classroom climate by the teacher (e.g., acknowledging students' backgrounds as important, maintaining a civil classroom environment, encouraging cooperative learning), cooking ethnic foods, emphasizing the history of marginal groups in American history, and critically analyzing the structure of society (e.g., racism, stereotypes, forced immigration). Perhaps the most surprising response came from almost one-fourth of the respondents (19 of 80). They reported that they had neither seen nor implemented any multicultural practices during their student teaching.

The third questionnaire item asked, "When you think about multicultural education, what are two questions you would like answered before you begin teaching?" Seventy-five percent of these responses were sorted by Goodwin into two categories: concerns with instruction and concerns with self. Concerns with instruction revolved largely around curriculum issues. For example, students asked such questions as, "How can I incorporate all cultures within the curriculum?" "What is enough?" "How does one include everyone in class?" and "Is there evidence to show that multicultural education benefits the students it serves?" A separate but related issue concerned the very nature of multicultural education. Twelve percent of the responses indicated some degree of uncertainty about what multicultural education is with such questions as, "How will I define multicultural education?" and "What is multicultural education?" With respect to personal concerns, students had questions about such issues as how much autonomy they would have in formulating a multicultural curriculum, whether peers or administrators would approve of such teaching, what kinds of mistakes or misconceptions they needed to avoid, and how they should handle racially charged situations.

It is tempting to conclude that the diversity of conceptions and concerns about multicultural education displayed by Goodwin's sample of preservice teachers simply mirrors the diversity of conceptions and opinions expressed in the literature. While there may be some truth to that analysis, it ignores some disturbing aspects of these students' responses. For the most part, these teachers-to-be saw multicultural education as a stand-alone component that one plugs into the curriculum at appropriate times (e.g., Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, Hanukkah). And the scope and duration of these components depends largely on the presence of such external constraints as attitudes of others, available material, and recognized holidays or events. But the leading proponents of multicultural education (such as James Banks, Christine l Grant, Daniel Gollnick, and Sonia Nieto) argue that teachers should constantly integrate such lessons into the curriculum because all individuals benefit from un-

derstanding the characteristics of different groups of people and because a multicultural orientation leads one to adopt generally effective teaching practices. Thus, well trained teachers do not wait to be told to develop multicultural lessons or limit the scope of the lessons to the available resources, but recognize that multicultural practices are an inherent and constant part of what they do with their students every day.

If Goodwin's sample of preservice teachers are representative of that population, then those of us in the teacher education business who agree with the writings of Banks, Sleeter, Grant, etc., have much work to do.

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that these notions of management are not compatible with building the kinds of learning communities we are trying to build where students have a stake in their own learning and their own school community. Still, there are some enduring principles: Teachers need to make expectations explicit to students, both the academic and the social. There needs to be a level of trust so that students can have ownership and a stake in what occurs in the classroom.

MWER: How has diversity and our changing social contexts affected learning and classroom management?

CME: If learning is the goal, we cannot only deal with, but must celebrate diversity, if we understand it as different paths to the same goal. Concerning social contexts, may students in schools today have competing agendas. Our society and our schools are in a real dilemma about how to teach students who don't want to be there, and the problem of keeping order for the students who do want to be there.

MWER: Do you see teachers as being victims of the system and their enviroment?

CME: I don't think teachers are victims, but they are often the ones who must be the most responsive and the most creative in working through individual problems with students.

MWER: How can this be changed?

CME: I think we have to begin to rethink our old notions of authority and whose responsibility it is...who has it, who doesn't, who has voice, who can articulate that voice and the vision. We have to find ways to work together with students, parents, and community to build a shared vision of what kind of schooling we want and what kind of schooling we need.

Reference

Randolph, C. H., & Evertson, C. M. (1994). Images of management for learner-centered classrooms. *Action in Teacher Education, 16,* 55-63.