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Supporting Collaborative Reflections: Case Writing in an Urban Professional Development School

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> Teaching often does not include the opportunity to share with a colleague its joy and despair; how to address the multitude of split second decisions you must make on a daily basis; what to do when a lesson fails; how to address the concerns of an irate parent; or where to find resources when needed.... Time works against us....Hallways and lounge conversations aren't adequate. Through case writing, we have finally found the precious time to reflect on our experiences.

This teacher, involved in a writing project at Howard Elementary, an urban professional development school, emphasizes the importance of reflecting with other teachers about her daily work. Her comment represents the project. It also echoes what many

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educators say are the benefits of ongoing activities that promote collective reflection on practice for teachers who work in professional development schools (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Lieberman & Miller, 1992). In such a context, these educators argue, professional development activities not only help teachers improve what they do in the classroom but also what they do as educators of novice teachers. And, "as classroom teachers become teacher educators, they find their own knowledge base deepening and their teaching becoming more thoughtful" (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 11).

Howard Elementary, located in a poor neighborhood, is one of five professional development schools involved in a partnership with a large urban university for the purpose of both teacher education and school reform. Nine out of ten of its 750 students qualify for reduced price lunches. Nearly all of the school population is minority, with the majority African-American, a third Hispanic, and about five percent Caucasian. In addition to its regular education program, the school houses a Head Start program and large programs in special education and bilingual education. Altogether, teachers, teacher assistants and ancillary staff total nearly ninety. When we began a case writing project at Howard Elementary our primary purpose was to produce a book of teacher-written cases about teaching dilemmas that could be used in our teacher education courses. Like others who have worked with practicing teachers incase writing (Shulman & Colbert, 1989; Barnett & Tyson, 1993), we realized that its outcomes would extend far beyond our original purpose. As the Howard teachers reflected on their work and engaged in the process of writing cases for preservice teachers, they were thinking critically not only about their work in classrooms but their work in educating novice teachers.

Case writing is not an easy task for teachers who are used to exchanging anecdotes about their teaching in brief teacher lounge encounters. Teachers need considerable support in moving beyond simple story-swapping (Little, 1990), to a point where they are writing dramatic narratives about their experiences in urban classrooms and urban schools that would invite critical analysis and problem-solving in preservice teachers.

As teacher educators, we began asking ourselves how we might best support the learning of these practicing teachers engaged in case writing. Our curiosity prompted a study of this project's outcomes, as well as our own role in supporting those outcomes. This interpretative

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study (Erickson, 1986) was informed by several data sources: semi-structured oral interviews (tape recorded and transcribed), written reflections of the 20 teachers who participated in the case writing workshop; multiple drafts of fourteen teaching cases; our observations and field notes as we conducted the case writing workshop; and audiotapes of most of the case writing workshop sessions.

The Case Writing Project

Our interest in developing teaching cases has been largely influenced by our desire to develop in preservice teachers the disposition to reflect on practice that is advocated by both Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983, 1987). Dewey argues that reflective thinking is a careful and systematic problem-solving process that requires going beyond one's own experience and knowledge for solutions. One must be willing to suspend judgment in a search "for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur" (p.13). In writing about the "reflective practitioner," Schön (1983) speaks of reflection as a process of thinking back, analyzing, and re-evaluating professional actions and problem solving. Through reflection, a professional becomes conscious of tacit professional knowledge used in the heat of action.

In teacher education cases are often used to help preservice teachers gain practice in clinical problem solving, pedagogical reasoning, and reflection on practice (Kagan, 1993; Kleinfeld, 1991; Shulman, 1992a; Stoiber, 1991; Sykes & Bird, 1992). While these cases are usually vivid stories of teachers grappling with dilemmas that have more than one possible solution, they must make a "theoretical claim" and stand as an "instance of a larger class" (Shulman, 1992, p.17). Cases in teacher education, then, represent problems or dilemmas that teachers typically face. As groups of teachers or preservice students analyze a case and debate possible solutions in light of educational theory and research, they become more adept in the complex problem-solving that teachers need to do.

Our design of the case writing workshop was influenced largely by other teacher educators who have worked with practicing teachers to create teaching cases for preservice teachers (Shulman & Colbert, 1989; Shulman, 1992b; 1994; Shulman, Colbert, Kemper & Smytriv, 1990). Shulman (1992, 1994) maintains that teacher/case writers need numerous dialogues with an editor and other case writers during

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the revision process in order to turn simple teacher stories into complex teaching cases.

In the Howard Project, twenty teachers who volunteered to participate were released from classes for a case writing workshop which met for eight two and one half hour sessions. The teachers included special and general education teachers, teachers in the school's bilingual program, and specialist teachers (reading, physical education). They represented all grade levels in the school (K-5), and their experience levels ranged from two to over twenty years.

In the workshop, teachers read and discussed sample cases, brainstormed and discussed the dilemmas they faced as urban teachers, wrote drafts of their own teaching cases, offered each other feedback on cases in progress, and revised their cases. Teacher educators, teachers from other professional development schools, and student teachers provided written and oral comments on the cases.

Project Outcomes for the Teacher/Case Writers

There were three professional outcomes for those involved in this case writing project. First, there was a refinement in their processes of analytic problem-solving and self-assessment. There was also increased collaboration and communication among the case writing teachers and across the school community. Finally, they began viewing themselves as teacher educators within a professional development school.

Refinement of Analytic Problem Solving and Self-Assessment

During our interviews, all of the teachers reported that case writing helped them analyze and evaluate their own practice more carefully. Seventeen of the twenty teachers who wrote cases specifically mentioned the development of skills in constructive problem solving and analysis as an important outcome from the case writing project. Case writing had engaged them in brainstorming, problem definition and analysis, and the generation and evaluation of solutions.

Many reported some progress made in applying this problem-solving process to a teaching dilemma they faced, attributing it to the more thorough way in which they gave attention to alternative solutions by writing and discussing them with others. For example, a

special education teacher who wrote about the conflicts she was having with a teacher assistant reported:

> Writing it all down and discussing it with other people and just... thinking about it...[helped me] look at my problem differently. I tried more to look at things through [the teaching assistant's] perspective to see what she might be thinking, how she might be feeling.

Most reported that the case writing process and discussions with other teachers had broadened their perspectives, providing them with a rare glimpse into others' classrooms and the realization that "there were other people facing similar or more difficult circumstances." Newly found support from peers encouraged a greater willingness to try out new solutions to problems. A kindergarten teacher reflected:

> A lot of times... you might think of the same things because you think [a new idea] is too farfetched or that it will never work, but then when you find out from somebody who has your same type or need or problem... [that] they've tried [that idea] and it's worked.... that gives you a good feeling that there are different things you can try.

Teachers discussed how they were able to apply these new perspectives to their particular case. For some, this broadening meant they were more able to take on their students' point of view. A fourth grade teacher reported that case writing "made me look from a more compassionate viewpoint towards his [the student's] problem, where I'd say prior to this we had bumped heads so many times that it was like... we were on a collision course."

Teachers reported that some involved in the project were taking a more constructive and deliberate approach to student problems during the case writing project. According to one, this writing "really caused a lot of discussion in the teachers' lounge... about the positive aspects of these children, not so much the negative."

In addition to increased development of problem-solving skills, fifteen teachers reported that they looked more critically at themselves. In the words of one teacher, it "helped me to really reflect on what I have been doing and what the needs are... and what I can do in the future... to become a better teacher for these students." Case writing also helped several teachers recognize and appreciate

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their own strengths—an outcome particularly important and empowering to several of the most experienced teachers. As one veteran observed: "The case study kind of reminds you of everything you've learned....we have untapped knowledge we don't even know [is] there unless we sit and reflect."

Collaboration and Communication Across the School Community

Almost every teacher noted collaborating with peers in problem-solving was a dramatic contrast to their usual practice, where they felt isolated with little time to "discuss what's going on and what other people think might be able to help you." The case writing workshop, with its cross section of teachers, "brought our faculty together," according to one participant. Supporting this view, several teachers noted a change in communication patterns among school staff members that went beyond the case writing sessions. Several now spoke with teachers who they had never talked with previously.

This project made some, more aware of serious school wide problems, express a desire to work collectively toward solutions. For example, one teacher who wrote about the inconsistency among school teachers in the enforcement of school rules, felt empowered by the support he received from other teachers in identifying this problem and a renewed commitment in working for change. A kindergarten teacher said that the case writing and case discussions made her more aware of the conflicting teaching philosophies operating in the school: "It makes me feel that I really want to get a little more involved in... school committees."

Additionally, five teachers mentioned an interest in developing small teacher support teams as an outgrowth of this project. Feeling the value of the group problem solving process, these teachers proposed to the principal that small groups of teachers across grade levels and specialties in the school be formed to collaborate and offer each other support on the issues and dilemmas that they faced alone in their classrooms.

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Emergent Teacher Educators in a Professional Development School

As they reflected on what they hoped their cases would teach university students learning to teach, participants thought about what it means to be a teacher and how they might pass along their own teaching expertise.

In their comments about what student teachers might learn from their cases, many expressed strong views about what knowledge was of most worth. A great number of the teachers felt that it would be important for student teachers to confront the dilemmas and often unsolvable problems that teachers face on a daily basis. A second grade teacher maintained:

> [The cases] will prepare them better for the unexpected.... There are no clear-cut answers or solutions....I think they need to know that if you do X, then Y will not always follow. Every child is different. Every situation is different and... you're going to have to have a lot of flexibility.

Besides immersing them in the "real world" of teaching, however, many thought that prospective teachers must also be given some insight into the rewards of teaching in urban schools. "Yes, there are problems... we agonize over, but those joys we'd like to share too," said one veteran teacher.

The interviews with teachers, the audiotapes of the case writing sessions, and our field notes/observations underscored a critical factor in helping teachers expand their role to that of teacher educator: writing for an audience of preservice teachers. This task allowed teachers to distance themselves from their situations. During the case writing sessions, particularly as the teachers moved into the revision stages, the discussion invariably would turn to how student teachers might react to the case, or what additional detail a student teacher would need in order to understand it. The teachers continually posed questions and pushed each other to add more details so that preservice teachers could come to grips with the problems in the case.

As teachers thought about what preservice teachers needed to know in a case, there was considerable discussion and debate at the revision stage regarding how open-ended cases should be. For example, in one case about a child with puzzling, autistic-like behaviors, the teachers debated over whether the author should

include a series of questions at the end of the case that would lead to possible explanations for the student's behavior. They argued that student teachers would not have enough knowledge about the neurological, physical, or social problems that students bring to school to understand the case without guidance. Another, though, countered: "I think if you are going to use this [case] as a learning tool, students have to come up with their own questions."

As Shulman (1994) found in her study of the professional growth of a teacher/case writer with whom she worked, "thinking about 'audience' pushes the case writer to think like a teacher about the case as a lesson or curriculum" (p.22). In thinking about a potential audience of preservice teachers, the participants learned how to think like teacher educators.

What We Learned about Supporting Teachers in Case Writing

Initially, many teachers are reluctant writers. Here we found it necessary to make the workshop atmosphere comfortable and informal with food, drink, and computers. It was important to plan for some "stew time" and spontaneous conversations during writing times. Interviews with the teachers suggest that the informal, collaborative approach to case writing helped many teachers get over their initial reluctance to write. As one kindergarten teacher described it:

> [At first] it was a little threatening, knowing that other teachers and professionals were going to be reading your work. You don't want to sound like you're a fifth grader writing But after awhile when you took the risk and… with the sharing... I didn't feel that threatened.

At the outset, many were interested only in writing cases as a forum to express frustrations about their problems with students, parents, administrators, teacher unions, colleagues, and school district policies. However, we found that the task of case writing for an audience of preservice teachers helped move them beyond these motivations.

Although teachers began to view problems from a new vantage point, we could have done more to help them get beyond the limitations of their own experience and that of their peers. In keeping with Dewey's (1933) definition of reflection, which requires going

beyond one's own experience and knowledge, we could have provided literature pertinent to the case dilemmas. For example, one teacher wrote about her frustrations about kindergarten retention and the difficulty in communicating her opposition to it to colleagues. Access to the literature on kindergarten retention may have helped inform her position.

Furthermore, we could have done more to push these teachers to discuss the principles, theories, or values embedded in their cases (Shulman, 1987; McAninch, 1993). Shulman (1992b, 1994) does this by continually asking teachers/case writers about their cases and providing extensive written and oral feedback. As university teacher educators in a professional development school working hard to build the trust of practicing teachers, we need to balance our desire to accommodate and support the teachers with a need to offer teachers constructive criticism of their cases.

We learned that the case writing process was strengthened because all of the case writers were working together in the same school and extending discussions of their cases into their everyday conversations. This advantage, however, raised issues of confidentiality that needed to be addressed. Some of the teachers wanted to write cases about their colleagues; some wanted to criticize the administration; some were writing about students or parents who were known to other teachers.

To solve some of these problems, we agreed as a group that none of our discussions would be shared with those outside of the case discussion group. Pseudonyms were created for all the cases. In addition, some of the case writers chose not to publish their cases but gave permission to have them used with preservice teachers at the university who were unfamiliar with their school.

As we reflect on how we conceptualized and supported teacher reflection about their case writing in this project, we now see that a more explicit social and moral framework for thinking about the cases was needed (Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Liston & Zeichner, 1991). For example, one of the cases which portrayed a clash between two teachers and a teaching assistant included issues of race and class in a school where the majority of teachers are white and the majority of para-professional teaching assistants are African-American and Hispanic. Behind the case of "Ben" (http://www.teachingeducation.com/vol. 9-1 .whipp.htm) are issues of

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equity in standardized testing, retention policies, and school grouping practices.

Epilogue

The reflection, collaboration, and growth as teacher educators that began with this project continues at Howard Elementary. In the year following the project, we continued to work with a smaller group of teachers in the school on further revisions of some of the cases. Some of those teachers led case discussions with a class of preservice teachers doing field work in the school.

Many of the teachers/case writers continue to take their new role as teacher educator very seriously as they mentor fieldwork students and student teachers. Others have continued inquiry into their practice through action research projects which they have shared with their colleagues and their preservice teachers. This year, three are teaching university courses in the school; two are team teaching a course on African American and Hispanic family life for the practicing teachers in the school; and one is teaching an Introduction to Teaching course on site.

What began for us as an attempt to integrate teaching cases into our teacher education curriculum resulted in our learning about the power of case writing as a way to support the reflection, collaboration, and teacher educator role of school-based teachers in a professional development school. This project has suggested to us that case writing in professional development schools may be a powerful way to link the learning of preservice and practicing teachers. At the same time, it offers a framework for inquiry and research into teaching practice that can integrate the craft knowledge of practicing teachers with the more traditional forms of theory and research found in universities, and lead us to the institutional change in both locations that professional development schools are supposed to engender.

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