

## **“We Were the Teachers, not the Observers”: Transforming Teacher Preparation through Placements in a Creative, After-School Program**

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We’ve reached an unprecedented time in American education, one fraught with demands of accountability, standardized testing, and national curricula. Students, teachers, administrators, school districts, and those of us working in teacher preparation all come under pressure for better performance. As educators, we concern ourselves with what works in the classroom, what motivates students and helps them learn, and what research demonstrates successful or promising practice. Yet we struggle against outside pressures while attempting to put our plans in action. At a recent professional development session that Nikki and Iris attended, teachers listened closely to a presentation on arts integration and spoke highly of its potential.<sup>1</sup> But when asked how they might integrate the arts into their own classrooms, these teachers expressed concern that there just wasn’t enough time, given the outside pressures. While anecdotal, the conversations that we overheard during this professional development session demonstrated that as teachers, we need experiences that enable us to apply new ideas, not just simply to listen and observe. Once the leaders broke the teachers into groups and asked them to reenact historical moments of history through tableaux, the impossible became possible. Ideas for classroom implementation bounced around the tables.

Housed in both departments of English and education, we who work in teacher preparation are concerned that outside pressures which tell new teachers to raise test scores and meet standards will take precedence over our efforts to coach them to teach well. In this article, we consider how to create a culture of artistic teaching and learning by changing the way pre-service teachers are trained. Specifically, we explain the evolution of an alternative field experience program called Razorback Writers. The program is based on the guiding concepts of arts integration and project-based learning for prospective teachers applying to the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. We frame our discussion within the context of authentic, intellectual achievement. Further, we discuss why we were drawn to these methods, their merits, and goals. We describe a way to supplant observation with action in teacher preparation.

Our work initiated in an effort to address shared concerns between education and English faculty about teacher preparation, though admittedly we were concerned only about future English teachers at first. What prompted us to re-evaluate our pre-service teachers’ practicum experience and the associated course was our awareness that a traditional pre-service field experience, one where candidates observe in a classroom situation and perhaps teach a lesson or two, could actually be counterproductive to their development as future teachers. Those up to their elbows in education over the past ten years have seen many strong teachers leave the classroom, if not leave education alto-

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<sup>1</sup> Editors’ Note: “Laying a Foundation: Defining Arts Integration,” a seminar developed by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., has been presented to teachers in cities nationwide, 2010-2011.

gether. And when candidates report to a classroom for observations, they may actually see teaching that is anything but exemplary. As Jeff Wilhelm and Bruce Novak write in *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom*, “a generation of teachers and several generations of students have had the enlivening possibilities of learning systematically drained out of them” (9). Test preparation activities or curricula that have been regulated by a constant pursuit of proficiency rule the day. While the intention of No Child Left Behind rightly concerns forgotten or overlooked sub-populations, teachers have been forced to focus their attention on getting their students to minimum proficiency levels rather than pushing them far beyond that goal. Arne Duncan’s observation that the standards of education have been lowered over the past decade is right (Dillon). In our opinion, educational standards are inevitably lowered by campaigns that promote rote teaching and excessive test preparation. When teacher-education programs send candidates into schools where these practices prevail, the candidates’ field experiences may actually reproduce an unacceptable status quo.

While this need pushed our thinking, we lacked the power to change national policies, to reduce pressures on the various stakeholders, or to significantly change the local teacher education program. We did, however, gain access to two critical groups: middle school students from four local schools and future secondary teachers of English, foreign languages, math, science, and social studies. These pre-service teachers participated in the practicum course required for admission into the MAT program. Essentially, we hoped to redesign our practicum so that these pre-service teachers would have the guaranteed opportunity to observe and directly practice creative teaching—an opportunity we hoped would open their eyes to the potential of creative, personal teaching strategies.

### **Razorback Writers**

Because our pre-service practicum is titled CIED 4131—4 plus 1 plus 3 plus 1—we call our pre-service teachers “Niners.” We had two concerns about the Niners. First, the Niners needed better opportunities both to observe and to practice creative teaching. Second, as a result of rapid population growth and change in our community, middle-school students’ performance on literacy assessments had dropped significantly. The Niners would be observing and working with these youngsters.

Created in the summer of 2010, the Razorback Writers project responds to both of these problems. As a literacy enrichment program built on the concepts of arts integration and project-based learning, Razorback Writers exposes struggling students to creative, meaningful literacy work while also allowing pre-service teachers to see and practice creative teaching. Our program seeks to foster what Judith Langer calls “high literacy,” which is reflected by “students’ ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations, and to perform well on reading and writing assessments” (838).

By focusing on personal, reflective projects that challenge students to connect deeply to reading and writing, we hope to model for the Niners how creative strategies can motivate students to become stronger readers, writers, and thinkers. Razorback Writers transforms the middle-school classroom from a test-preparation site into a space that really matters for students. In their book *Third Space: When Learning Matters*, Stevenson

and Deasy write, “Creating works of art, which inherently calls for a personal stamp, seems uniquely powerful in generating the commitment to acquiring the skills to do so. Ultimately, students are helped to learn, read, speak, and write with skill and enthusiasm when to do so matters to them” (63).

Like Stevenson and Deasy, we believe that arts integration has the potential to teach students a great deal about empathy, tolerance, and community. Like Wilhelm and Novak, we see the importance of the reflective dimension of aesthetic experiences. And like Maxine Greene, we understand the potential of engaging the imagination to push students to reflect and connect more deeply (3). As Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald write in *Reason to Believe*, “The self does more than link itself through introspection to society; the knowledge of self attained in the process of self-examination becomes a lesson on how to be a self in a world populated by other selves” (60). Of all of the approaches that we could be modeling for our pre-service teachers, we felt that the reflective, personal nature of arts-integration would give the Niners something that they would not easily find in their first contact with the classroom as teachers.

Razorback Writers—an after-school, arts-integrated, project-based curriculum—was a natural choice. In the short time that the project has been running, it has made an impact on kids. We knew we had little chance of keeping middle-school students in their seats at the end of a long school day if we did not connect personally with them. We knew that bringing in fine and performing arts to help students “construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form” would help us get kids up and interacting with us, each other, and the texts in that “third space” where students are deeply absorbed in the creative process (“Laying a Foundation”; Stevenson and Deasy 10). We also knew from our own teaching and learning experiences that students would be more motivated to read, produce, and create if they were encouraged to “go through an extended process of inquiry”—especially if they felt that their work would culminate in some tangible end product that would have an audience outside of our classroom (“What is PBL?”).

Ultimately, what we wanted to do for the Niners through our partnership with Razorback Writers was to give them the opportunity to see and experience how arts-integration and project-based learning strategies can be used to deliver content, cultivate skills, and engage with communities. By giving this experience to the Niners before they entered the field of education, we wanted to illustrate how creative teaching could be done. Because some Niners are resistant to arts integration—many of whom are insecure about their own creative potential—we also hoped to give them the confidence to explore alternative strategies in their own teaching. As Stevenson and Deasy explain, in order for arts integration to become a realistic approach for teachers, it is imperative that they see quality arts integration in practice (82).

### **Authentic Pedagogy**

As we began to create a new, stronger structure for our practicum through our partnership with the Razorback Writers project, we called on Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran’s concept of “authentic intellectual achievement” to make sure that we would be providing our Niners with authentic teaching experiences as well as opportunities

to learn and reflect outside of the classroom. In their article, “Authentic Pedagogy and Student Performance,” Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran explain that authentic achievement has three criteria: “construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school” (282).

To ensure that the pre-service teachers participating in Razorback Writers had an authentic learning experience, they were required to construct knowledge alongside the middle-school students. Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write, “[students] express this knowledge in written and oral discourse . . . in the construction and repair of objects . . . and in performances for audiences” (283). Rather than memorizing and reproducing information, the construction of knowledge requires learners to participate actively in the learning process by expressing something new.

Next, the Niners were challenged to participate in disciplined inquiry, “using a prior knowledge base from one or more fields, striving for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness, and expressing conclusions through elaborated communication” (283). By activating the Niners’ prior knowledge and adding to their reservoirs of information, requiring a long-term commitment from every Niner, and promoting reflection and communication through all parts of the process, we helped them to engage in deep inquiry about what they and the kids were doing with arts integration in Razorback Writers.

The third principle that we adopted from Newman, Marks, and Gamoran was an emphasis that the project needed to have value outside of the classroom setting. They explain, “The third distinction between authentic intellectual achievement and conventional school achievement is that authentic achievements have aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value apart from documenting the competence of the learner” (284). To accomplish this goal of creating projects with authentic, aesthetic value, we made sure that all middle-school students’ projects were aimed at real audiences and that the major components of the program would give the pre-service teachers a better understanding of their evolving teaching philosophy.

Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write that the primary challenge that learners face is to “produce” rather than “reproduce” meaning or knowledge (283). For the Niners in our practicum course, we knew that this meant that they needed to be actively interacting through teaching, and we gave them the opportunity to do this by requiring that they all participate in the Razorback Writers project. Walk into any of the Razorback Writers’ after-school sites, and these are some of the images you can expect to see: a pre-service teacher standing with a group of students, performing a readers theatre script; groups working on projects at tables or on the floor, teachers and students indistinguishable from one another; pre-service teachers on their haunches, sitting on the floor, or rolling around in office chairs—assisting kids with art and writing; pens, pencils and paper; feathers, sequins, and paint; cameras and computers. These are the images of a program steeped in the arts and driven by a constructivist paradigm that champions project-based, collaborative learning. By involving our Niners in the design and implementation of a project that is creative and student driven, we expose them to another vision of what learning can look like beyond the world of standardized testing.

For the Niners, the opportunity to see the arts in tandem with literacy instruction is invaluable. Too often, when new teachers enter the classroom they revert to what

they know, which for many of them is some variation on the theme of “drill and kill.” Especially in the traditional observation setting, it would be quite courageous for a pre-service teacher to try an approach that diverged drastically from that which they were observing. In her reflective essay for our practicum, one Niner who completed both traditional observation hours and time with Razorback Writers, explained, “While observing Mrs. Pincher, I also had the opportunity to see her teaching methods. She designed a similar schedule every week. For example, Mondays are devoted to vocabulary; Tuesdays are devoted to textbook material; Wednesdays are devoted to worksheets; Thursdays are devoted to group activities; and Fridays are test days.” Of course, while these kinds of regimented teaching strategies impact students in the classroom, they also influence the pre-service teacher observing mediocre teaching. Without a creative model and the autonomy to experiment with teaching methods, pre-service teachers are destined to copy what they have experienced as students or observed—what Dan Lortie referred to in 1975 as “apprenticeship of observation” (62). One attribute of our project is that Niners not only see creative teaching in action, but they are also given the opportunity to help to design the curriculum. And as the semester progresses, they are expected to take a more and more active role in facilitating. At the end of the fall semester of 2010, one of our pre-service teachers wrote, “While I have learned a lot by observing Mrs. Green, I feel like I got the most out of being a part of the Razorback Writers project. The project was more hands-on than observing. We were the teachers, not the observers.”

At one site, for example, we asked our pre-service teachers to talk to the students to decide what kind of project they would like to do and then to design a venture that would both fit with the students’ interests and accomplish our literacy goals. Ultimately, the project that these pre-service teachers and middle-school students designed was one of the most exciting to take place that semester. Our Niners and their students pitched the idea of an autobiographical portfolio that the students would fill with stories, poetry, photography, and art. This spring, the new cohort of Niners at this site has picked up the project and plans to have students tie the autobiographical material they have already produced in with the art and writing they are doing as they read the book *Seedfolks*. In *Seedfolks*, each chapter is a vignette describing one character in the book. At the end of the semester, students at this site will each compile their visual art, photography, and writing into a chapter of their own, which will then be published in a book to be shared with students, parents, and the school. Though many of the middle-school students at this site came into the project with a negative attitude about reading and writing, they have become enthusiastic about the final product and are working hard on their chapters. It is through successful experiences like this that our Niners can see how arts integration can change students who see reading and writing as unpleasant tasks into students who use these skills to get engaged in highly creative, literacy-based work.

At yet another site, the students are creating a magazine issue called “You, Me, and the World.” The goal of this project is to help the students develop both a stronger sense of their community and a stronger global perspective. The unit began by focusing on the most significant geological feature of Northwest Arkansas: The Ozark Mountains. Still on the Hill, a nationally and internationally acclaimed folk group that specializes in songs about Ozark characters, came to the site and performed a private concert. Still-on-the-Hill musicians Donna Sterjna and Kelly Mullhollan explained the stories

behind their songs and described their research experiences. After more research about the Ozarks and the Northwest Arkansas area, students were encouraged to go out and interview a relative or friend, to collect information that they could craft into a story, poem, or song with the assistance of the Niners and site coordinators. Gathering the stories of people in the community is an interactive method to learn the history of an area and to deepen the students' sense of community and family.

In addition to researching the history of Northwest Arkansas, the site coordinators also invited several international students from the University of Arkansas and Spring International—an intensive English language school—to visit the site. These international students taught the middle-school students phrases from their native languages, discussed their countries, and led the students in an arts-related activity. The participating international students came from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Japan primarily. The direct contact with people from around the world would, we hoped, cultivate in these students a global, open-minded perspective of the world.

As we continue to interact with both local and international people, we will be processing these experiences through collage, tableau, short writing pieces, and other arts-related activities. All the projects will be archived and included in a magazine for the students to have themselves and distribute. The magazine will serve not only as a reminder for our students of what they accomplished over the term, but, hopefully, it will also help encourage anyone who reads the magazine to appreciate what it means to interact artfully with the world.

Newmann, Marks and Gamoran explain that students must rely on “disciplined inquiry,” a construct that “consists of three main features: using a prior knowledge base from one or more of the fields, striving for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness, and expressing conclusions through elaborated communication” (283). In all three of the aforementioned projects, disciplined inquiry allowed site coordinators and Niners to sequence activities in order to build on “prior knowledge base” to create “in-depth understanding” that would then be expressed through “elaborated communication.” At both sites, students read poems and short stories, discussed elements of style, and listened to international students' presentations about their countries, thus allowing them to pick up the vocabularies, concepts, and conventions that they would need to create their own work. During the second stage of the projects, students applied the conventions they'd learned to their own writing, focusing primarily on the concept of identity in both instances. At both sites, students had a clear vision of their final projects, which helped them to dive more deeply into one single topic. Finally, the middle-school students at both sites created and compiled a publication that showcased their verbal and visual pieces. Through the creation of these public artifacts, students were able to see their work as reaching beyond the walls of the classroom, a step that brought them closer to perceiving themselves as writers and artists.

### **What the Niners Learned: Two Illustrations**

In addition to giving the middle-school students richer learning experiences, we sought to develop “a community of discourse” in order to “advance the knowledge” of teacher preparation (308). Though the field of teacher preparation isn't what Newmann,

Marks and Gamoran originally focused upon, areas beyond the traditional disciplines can be included when “a field of expertise . . . has a formal knowledge base and functions” like a discipline.

Our goal of pushing the Niners towards “disciplined inquiry” took multiple forms. First, we expanded the pre-service teachers’ knowledge base by exposing them to and involving them in professional conversations that are happening in the field of education. Each week, the Niners completed readings that covered a range of topics, such as teaching English Language Learners, working with students with disabilities, delivering content in the after-school setting, understanding adolescent development, etc. In addition, they were also asked to participate in electronic or face-to-face discussions with their site teams in order to discuss the relationship between what they read and what they were experiencing in their projects. At the end of each semester, Niners reported being better prepared for their final reflective papers as well as for their interviews to enter the MAT program. Both the reflective papers and the interviews ask the Niners to explain their teaching philosophies and place themselves within academic conversations happening in their field. If these pre-service teachers were allowed to enter the profession without experiences that prevented passive methods of teaching and narrow views on what constitutes education, the very situations we helped to repair would be replicated.

Finally, Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write that authentic intellectual achievement must have value beyond school in the form of “aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value apart from documenting the competence of the learner” (284). For our Niners, we created a final reflective project that would allow them to focus not only on what they had learned and experienced through their field experience, but most importantly, how this new knowledge had informed or contributed to their feelings about entering the teaching profession. For example, we learned through the final projects that most of the Niners’ attitudes about teaching in the middle grades is impacted by their work with the project. While many Niners come into the practicum with an idea that they are interested only in high school, the experience with middle-school students through Razor-back Writers gives them a favorable and more accurate understanding of what working with middle-school students would be like.

As Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran explain, “Understanding occurs as one looks for, tests, and creates relationships among pieces of knowledge that can illuminate a given problem or issue” (283). In the fall of 2011, the Niners at one of our sites modeled how this process would work. Our Niners were struggling with a particular student, Aaron (pseudonym), and eventually found out that this student had Asperger’s Syndrome. In addition to reading our class’ assignment on working with students with disabilities, the Niners contacted this student’s aide and did some outside research to get ideas for how to work with him. A Niner reflected,

We planned one activity in which we read the students a book about the three little pigs, but that was told from the wolf’s point of view. The goal of the assignment was to get the students thinking about how one story could be told lots of different ways and relate that back to their movie. However, we did not take into account that it can be almost impossible for students with Asperger’s to see things from any perspective other than their own.

In addition, after realizing that much of Aaron's resistance to the project was rooted in his anxiety in social situations and his discomfort with group work, the Niners were able to tailor the project so that Aaron had specific tasks he could work on independently. This experience not only involved constructing and producing knowledge but also disciplined inquiry. All of the Niners at this project reflected on their experience with this student in their final essay. Overall, this kind of experience models "authentic intellectual achievement," and is the kind of experience that we hope will blossom frequently from our redesigned practicum. Even if they had encountered challenging students like Aaron in an observation setting, it would be unlikely that they would be charged with addressing the issue on their own, which would have been a loss, both for our pre-service teachers and for students like Aaron.

In an interview, Michelle, a site coordinator, related a story about one of her Niners, Jocelyn, and a lesson gone wrong. In her first solo lesson, Jocelyn taught about Arkansas history, but she presented the lesson as a lecture, with the only student activity being a multiple choice quiz. Michelle explained that Jocelyn's handout was "aesthetically uninteresting" and that the lesson covered too much information. In fact, Michelle said that the quiz Jocelyn handed out at the end had even stumped her. When Michelle spoke with Jocelyn about the kids' negative response to the lesson, Jocelyn explained that she was not artistic and, as a social studies major, she just didn't know how to teach with art. This experience illustrates the precise need to guide emerging educators through processes like arts-integration. When the Niners fail to teach to their potential because of their own negative perceptions about themselves as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers, we see the importance of enacting creative teaching and providing a supportive environment for pre-service teachers to teach and learn from their teaching.

On the day after Jocelyn presented her lesson, the group scrambled for a way to reconnect with the students. Ditching their original plan for the day, Michelle's group told the students real, emotional stories about things that had happened to them, and then they asked the kids to write emotively about an experience of their own. Even though the students had had what Michelle called a "coup" in response to the previous day's lesson, she recounted that the day was one of their most successful, as students were excited about including the stories in their final project. The activity allowed the students and the Niners to connect in a personal way. This personal connection and affirmation that we can offer the students is what underlies our academic goals with Razorback Writers. When we show our students that we are working with them, that we are willing to share something about ourselves, and that we are interested in knowing about them, we can impact students in a different, more human way. When pre-service teachers experience the importance of connecting with students on a personal level and see how that connection can give more authenticity to school, teachers are created who can help to prepare students for life beyond school and tests.

### **Conclusion**

We do a disservice to our children and our community as a whole when we allow individuals who are interested in becoming teachers to begin their professional lives by

sitting in the back of a classroom. By involving our pre-service teachers in a practicum with an arts-integrated, project-based program at its core, we are able to circumnavigate outdated methods and approaches. By taking control over how our pre-service teachers complete their “observation” requirements, we can be sure that they are experiencing engaging, creative teaching. By exposing pre-service teachers to the literature of their field, we enable them to participate in the fundamental discussions happening in education. And by showing them how to use the arts and a project-based approach to teach in all disciplines, we prepare our pre-service teachers to cultivate the creative dynamic energy that we hope they will all bring to the classroom. In this age of standardized tests and the never-ending pursuit of monotony, we must redouble efforts to ensure that our new teachers remember this: the ultimate goal is not just to prepare students for success on exams, but to prepare them to become moral, ethical individuals who can contribute to society. School should be more about teaching students than it is about teaching subjects. They must learn about English or social studies or science or math in ways that matter to them.

In her well-known 1947 address to Oxford University, Dorothy Sayers explained,

We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks. Instead of them, we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more, and in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or looks to the end of the work.

Through Razorback Writers, we hope to show both students and pre-service teachers “the work as a whole.” The work as a whole—creating empathetic, imaginative, and inquisitive individuals who are poised to contribute to society—will not be achieved through passivity. Rather, by asking our pre-service teachers to become involved in education through writing and reading, movement and art, we are modeling the kind of wisdom that we hope these individuals will be able to apply both in their classrooms and beyond.



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