



The EdLinks University - School Partnership: Preservice Teachers Reading and Writing with Adolescents Labeled “At Risk”

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In a recent article, Anderson, Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Clark, Marx, and Peterson (1995) called for reform in Educational Psychology courses as a challenge to the paradigm of “instrumental cognitive rationality.” This phrase, coined by Habermas (1984), identifies traditional professional “training” programs as sites where students, like preservice teachers, learn knowledge and skills in a decontextualized setting early in their program. Later, following intensive concept oriented study, they are asked to apply what they’ve learned to real life settings. Students, including preservice teachers, have a very difficult time with this process for several reasons. For example, epistemologically speaking, in many ways knowledge is context bound and applying knowledge to new contexts is extremely difficult. In addition, and further compounding the situation, without the relevancy provided by context, many preservice teachers struggle through their foundational courses, using memorization to survive their tests. However, lacking the links to authentic applications, they are unable to make the appropriate transfer when asked to later in the program.

In response, EdLinks: A University-School Partnership was created by the first author of this paper and the assistant principal of a branch of the local high school (second author) as a mechanism for reform in both teacher education and K-12 schooling. For the EdLinks Partnership, secondary preservice teachers enrolled in the teacher education program at Montana State University tutor and mentor high school students labeled “at risk.” In exchange, the high school students provide the teacher education students with information about their lives which may support, challenge, or contradict the university course content. Through this experience, teacher education students are able to apply, test, and evaluate

theory in practice; they use their experiences working with the high school students as sites to transfer their knowledge of course content and apply it within classrooms and tutoring sessions. At the same time they learn, from the high school students, the current concerns and issues of adolescents. These two components are linked through course assignments which require that the teacher education students reflect upon and merge their experiences with adolescents with theories of adolescent development, teaching, and learning.

The Primacy of Reading and Writing

While the importance of reading and writing is emphasized in the primary grades, by the time students reach high school teachers often assume they've mastered the remarkable art of linking letters and sounds and decoding words. And indeed, for most students, this benchmark has been reached and far surpassed by high school. However there are always some students who learn to read and write later than others, and indeed, a large percentage of the students who apply and are accepted into this high school program have difficulties with reading and writing: From connecting sounds with letters and combinations of letters to the comprehension of text. As a contributing factor, young adults with difficulties deciphering text often feel like they are not smart enough to succeed in school and may also have constructed identities as school "failures."

How the Partnership Works

Preservice educators enrolled in the Educational Psychology and Adolescent Development course at Montana State University are involved in 15 hours of service learning: A balanced approach to engaging in service in the community (in this case, tutoring and mentoring high school students) as a method for better learning the content of their university course (in this case, the psychology of teaching, learning, and adolescent development). The preservice educators tour the program facilities, meet with the administrator, faculty, and students, observe classes in and out of their content areas, and work with teachers and students in a high school program designed to meet the needs of adolescents labeled "at risk." The high schoolers are in a high school program that serves seventy-five secondary students, grades 9-12, who have been labeled "at risk" for reasons such as, homelessness, parental substance abuse, and disengagement from the main high school program. High school students volunteer and apply to the program and are selected from a pool of applicants each quarter. They complete the same graduation requirements and adhere to the same attendance policy as local high school students.

The high school students are tutored in reading and writing across their content areas by preservice educators, each of whom are majoring in a particular content area. Though the focus is on academic tutoring, it is not unusual for the conversation to shift to life outside of school and issues other than mathematics and science. The preservice educators, as university students and adult role models who have survived adolescence, provide encouragement and act as “listeners” as high school students reflect on their experiences. The positive impact of caring adults who are interested in both the education of young people and the young people themselves can not be over stated.

And, as mentioned earlier, this “education and support” shifts reciprocally between the preservice educators and the high school students. Learning the issues at the forefront of the lives of today’s adolescents, and about lives which may be very different from their own, the preservice teachers learn much from the high school students with whom they work. The importance of the lessons taught and advice given by the high school students has a profound influence on preservice educators who may have never known some of the difficulties facing today’s youths.

Since its beginning, the EdLinks Partnership has paired over 230 future educators with high school students in “tutoring / mentoring” relationships focused on reading and writing in the content areas. For the vast majority of the university students, the partnership is “the best” and / or “the most important” aspect of their university course. For the high schoolers, the partnership provides academic support coupled with a caring adult and the chance to share their advice to the next generation of teachers. For the authors of this article, the partnership represents a commitment to the future of education as a whole and a method for eliminating the decontextualization of university coursework.

References

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