

## **Visions and Revisions: Student Teachers Rewriting Personal Narratives**

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Reflective teachers reflect in order to learn—to improve their understanding of, feelings about, and responses to the world of teaching. (LaBoskey, 1992, p.36)

The year in which a novice teacher undergoes the process of becoming a teacher is riddled with inconsistencies of thought and action, emotional hills and valleys, and growing demands on time and energy. As a record of those changes and as a means of prompting reflection, personal narratives offer a vehicle for student teachers to examine their progress as professionals.

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This research examines the personal narratives of 11 student teachers over the course of their professional preparation program. The study analyzes the student teachers' capacity for sustained reflection, changes in their beliefs about the teacher's role, and common patterns of professional development.

### **Perspective**

Reflection is a term often used in teacher preparation programs; however, its meaning is dependent on the speaker: "reflection has no definition, it is perceived in the eye of the beholder" (Sparks-Langer,

1992). Researchers offer a variety of categories or specific orientations of reflection. Georgea M. Sparks-Langer (1992) typifies them as cognitive, critical, and narrative approaches. Linda Valli (1993) poses categories arising from the quality and content of knowledge guiding practice: those of technical rationality orientation (behavioral and technical decision-making) and those of reflective practitioner orientation (reflection-in-action, deliberative, personalistic and critical). Reframing Van Manen's levels of reflectivity (practical/technical; social/political; and moral/ethical) as the foci or content of reflection, Vicki LaBoskey (1993) suggests that a teacher may consider issues in light of one or more categories as each focus is equally important in fostering reflectivity.

John Dewey (1933), in distinguishing between routine and reflective teaching, proposes openmindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness as characteristics of reflective practitioners. Lya K. Hayon (1990) further advances a definition of a reflective teacher as one who envisions knowledge as problematic, teaching as a moral enterprise, curriculum as reflexive, and the milieu as an issue of investigation. Teacher education programs that engender such modes of inquiry may serve their students well. Through a process of reflection and explanation, novice teachers learn about teaching while they are learning to teach (Richert, 1992). Personal knowledge of teaching is constructed and reconstructed, and new beliefs and ideas replace former ones. Learning by experience, or the "epistemology of practice," involves reframing conceptions of practice (Schon, 1983).

Life histories provide one form of narrative inquiry that builds upon the personal knowledge of student teachers as they participate in teacher induction programs. Life histories are not a new form of research; indeed, their extensive use in the field of sociology early in this century waned as the field shifted to a different research paradigm (Goodson, 1988). Problems with the representativeness of the cases as well as the extensive time commitment in recording such stories affected their continued use as a research tool; however, Ivor F. Goodson (1988) asserts that life histories can aid in the examination, generation, and utilization of theory. Yet their greatest strength, to Goodson, is their instantiation of "the subjective reality of the individual": the individual speaks with her/his own voice for her/his own story. D. Jean Clandinin (1992) agrees: "A look at life as narrative or storied allows us to see the unities, continuities and discontinuities, images and rhythms in our lives" (p. 124). Aside from the descriptive power of life histories, they can serve several functions: subjective (an explanation of an individual's beliefs and feelings), contextual (situate the individual within a time and place), and evaluative (Knowles, 1993). In essence, life histories make private thoughts public: they are told to someone.

Narratives can serve as a prompt for individuals to confront their preexisting beliefs. Novice teachers enter the field with a set of images and beliefs about teaching that they possess from their years as students, and these images and beliefs may do little to aid in their new role as teachers (LaBoskey, 1993). Continued

observation may do little to challenge their preconceptions (Grossman, 1990), but, as they move beyond observation into classroom teaching, student teachers often encounter discrepancies between their beliefs about ideal practices and the realities of teaching (Bullough, 1989; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Knowles, 1992). Robert V. Bullough and David K. Stokes (1994) found that for some student teachers, self-narratives aided their development as reflective practitioners as they reconceptualized their roles as teachers. The authors, in analyzing the content of their narratives, focused on the changing metaphors novice teachers employed in self-description over the course of a year. Students who engaged wholeheartedly in the process exhibited a higher depth of analysis, more focus on student learning, and greater ability for self-critique than the other novices.

Learning to teach is more than the development of technical expertise; it is a deeply personal experience. Student teachers are often stymied by their conflicting emotions, unable "to move around or through them to the substance about which those feelings are generated" (Richert, 1992, p.189). They are unable to name causes and analyze their situations. Personal histories provide a record of those feelings within a narrative frame, allowing the writer to story her/his life and to contextualize emotions.

Student teachers use narrative to recast issues of self-understanding about teaching. Our study examines the content and complexity of student teachers' personal histories over a year of student teaching at one school and addresses the following questions:

To what extent do student teachers have the capacity for sustained reflection about practice?

How do personal narratives aid student teachers in their understanding of practice and the role of a teacher?

Are there patterns of thinking that signify certain stages of professional understanding or development within a student teaching year?

### **Methodology and Data Sources**

This study analyzes the personal histories or narratives of 11 student teachers engaged in a year-long, post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program based on the professional development school model. The program attempts to introduce student teachers to a variety of teachers and teaching strategies, but it does not promote either a teacher-centered or student-centered philosophy.

The student teachers were placed as a cohort at a comprehensive high school. Located in an unincorporated area outside a city of 220,000 in southern California, the school has a highly ethnically diverse student population of 1,900 and serves a largely working-class community. The 11 teachers (four Caucasian females, two Hispanic females, five Caucasian males) represented four disciplines (English,

mathematics, social studies, and science), ranged in age from 22 to 41, and varied widely in their academic preparation.

Over the school year, the student teachers were asked to tell and retell their stories as they gained confidence and competence in the classroom. During the first three weeks of the school year, student teachers engaged in an intensive observation experience, guided by and recording in an observation handbook developed by teachers from the school site. This handbook focused on contextual features of the school—the staff, faculty, students, facilities, resources, and alternative education programs—as well as classroom observations within and across subject areas. They wrote notes on their observations as well as reflections on their future roles as teachers.

Throughout the year, they kept weekly journals on topical issues such as grading and assessment practices, multiculturalism, diverse learners, restructuring, curriculum differentiation, and classroom management. In addition, they interviewed cooperating teachers, support personnel, and individual students at the school.

The student teachers completed five autobiographical assignments over a year. For admission to the program, student teachers wrote personal philosophy statements on teaching. After the three weeks of intensive observation at the start of the school year, they compiled autobiographical sketches describing their personal interest in teaching. After fourteen weeks in the program, student teachers reviewed their observation handbooks and wrote stories about the differences between their earlier ideas and beliefs and their current ones. In early spring, after one quarter of full teaching responsibility, they focused on the opportunities and constraints they experienced as teachers. At the end of the school year, student teachers completed final reflection papers in which they were encouraged to review their previous histories, observation handbooks, and journals to revise their narratives in light of new understandings.

The data sources included the observation handbooks, personal histories, journals, lesson plans, and open-ended interviews with student teachers and cooperating teachers. Written observations by the university supervisor and the cooperating teachers were available for corroboration. Data analysis followed an iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1984) which included coding and annotating the data; creating data displays, seeking disconfirming and corroborative evidence; and identifying patterns, themes, and explanations. We constructed tables with regard to time, focus, and tone (i.e., engaged and disengaged) of the narratives. In addition to looking for commonalities across the sample, we noted at what point and about which issues the commonalities evaporated and differences arose.

## **Results**

From their writings the student teachers fell into two distinct groups: those student teachers who exhibited reflection in their narratives and those who did not. We called the two groups engaged novices and disengaged novices. The engaged

novices numbered eight in our sample; the disengaged three. In the following paragraphs, we provide a brief overview of these two groups, including similarities and differences in demographic characteristics.

For the engaged novices, reflective thinking was evident in their discussion of their practice and in their changing conceptions of their roles as teachers. Their narratives exhibited the contradictions, the tensions, and the self questioning indicative of complex thinking. The eight engaged novices wrestled with changing conceptions of their roles as teachers, their understandings about students, the nature of teaching, and their own personal growth.

This group of eight engaged teachers had little in common. They ranged in age from 22 to 41; four were male, four were female. Half of them had extensive subject-matter backgrounds; the other half held bachelor's degrees in their subject areas. Two of the engaged novices—a mathematics teacher and an English/history teacher—had a parent who had taught school; the other six did not. All had some experience working with students although those experiences varied. Four had teaching experience as university teaching assistants; two had substitute taught for months in the schools but dismissed that experience as distorted. Three others had tutored at-risk students. All but one recently-graduated English major had pursued other careers before deciding to become teachers. Although their tenure in their other careers varied in length of time, they, nonetheless, had come to teaching as a second career. After completing the credential program, all eight applied for and accepted full-time teaching positions.

In contrast, the disengaged novices exhibited little reflective thinking in their narratives. Issues of classroom control were foremost in their minds in the fall, and the lack of time became a concern once full-time teaching ensued. In their narratives, they did not address subject matter considerations, contextual variables, or instructional issues.

The disengaged novices possessed bachelor's degrees in their areas of teaching: two in English and one in social studies. All had fathers who were teachers whom they perceived as role models for their own teaching. One candidate possessed some classroom experience as a teacher's aide some years prior to her induction into teaching. However, the other two, recently graduated, had no classroom experience. All three had never questioned teaching as a career: it was a natural transition from their roles as students. Yet two of the three chose not to pursue full-time teaching positions the year following completion of the credential program.

In the following sections, we first discuss capacity for reflection and understanding of practice; then we describe patterns of professional development.

### **Capacity for Reflection and Understanding of Practice**

Since subject-matter background appeared to influence conceptions of teaching, the data on the capacity for reflection and understanding of practice are reported

in three sections: engaged novices with advanced study in their disciplines, engaged novices with bachelor's degrees, and disengaged novices.

***Engaged Novices with Extensive Subject Matter Preparation***

Bringing to their student teaching experience rich backgrounds in their subject matter, these four student teachers also had a minimum of two years of experience as teaching assistants at the university level. Two had completed coursework for a doctoral degree in their subject areas (history and biology), and two others possessed master's degrees in engineering and mathematics. In three of the four cases, the engaged novices used their knowledge as a basis for exploration into a less traditional teaching style: a hands-on, student-centered curriculum.

By December they shifted their orientation to students as they began to discern the differences between the knowledge base of high school students and college students. Perceiving "a gap," the lack of knowledge became a problem to be solved. As the biology Ph.D. stated, "The gap between high school and college students is wider than I thought.... But part of teaching is simply researching for ways to break down resistance to learning." The history major similarly acknowledged how students' backgrounds would influence teaching strategies:

I am amazed at the general lack of academic preparation the students exhibited. It is like they arrived at [the high school] in September without retaining anything from their previous eight to eleven years of schooling. While my alarm at this situation has not diminished, I think I now have a better understanding of the students' backgrounds. For most of the students and for their parents and community, the results of the Super Bowl are more important than the results of the seniors' SAT scores. Students who cannot recite their multiplication tables can recite the career statistics of the starting players for the LA Raiders. Breaking through this mentality will be one of my greatest challenges.

Although other engaged novices mentioned the apathy and behavior of the students, those with extensive subject matter preparation focused on the lack of subject knowledge in their students early in the year. Using the lack of knowledge as a point of departure, they began to focus on strategies to change this state of affairs. They quickly abandoned the style of teaching that they had cultivated in the college classroom and sought solutions beyond the instructional practices of their cooperating teachers. The two science teachers began impromptu labs using group investigation strategies. Labs in their classrooms were a common occurrence, far more common than the number of labs planned by cooperating teachers. As one general science student teacher wrote

My job is get to know the children and then design lessons that incorporate content and strategies appropriate for them. I found that for many students I must provide them with their very first hands-on experience. I have tried and experimented with many teaching strategies and techniques. I have found some ways to motivate students. I will continue to search for more.

This focus on subject matter and its skillful integration into the classroom was not limited to the two science student teachers. The history student teacher deviated from the textbook, bringing in artifacts, documents, and photographs to supplement the text as well as to incorporate collaborative instructional practices. Furthermore, she revised her definition of teaching from a teacher-centered approach—"essentially the transference of knowledge from teacher to student"—to a more student-centered approach—"directing the conditions that enable students to learn." She went on to explain that "good teachers provide an environment in which learning can take place; they provide materials and establish the structure that facilitates student learning."

As they began to tackle issues of content and pedagogy, they addressed possible solutions in their writing. One science student teacher wrote:

It seemed that the real world of the classroom required a different way of thinking. The concerns were not so vague and abstract but living people who had names, attitudes, habits and brains that needed to be engaged. Lesson planning quickly became a main focus for me. Somehow, consciously, subconsciously or out of simple necessity, I decided that if I was going to try to integrate this vast quantity of research information with all these new ideas and strategies into something useful (that is, to actually become a teacher), then it was going to have to be used to generate interaction between the kids and the lessons. My personal style was being born. I was slowly getting a feel for what ideas most appealed to me, what kids were capable of, what their skills and backgrounds were, what it meant to teach and to learn.

In this narrative, the student teacher describes the need to revise his teaching style and role in order to transform subject matter for student understanding. He now recognizes that *knowing* a subject is different from *teaching* it and that teaching strategies must be adapted to a specific group of students. The interaction of subject matter and student characteristics created the basis for his insight.

By the end of the school year, three of the four student teachers shifted their conceptualization of the teaching role from subject matter expert to teacher of students. The history teacher saw her role expand to include "a director of the conditions that enable students to learn" and "a social worker." She too attributed this change of heart to being "able to put real people in the place of the monolithic student." The biology teacher also shifted his view as scientist and expert to letting students "decide what they want to know more about and what information they will develop." His shift from teacher control over the curriculum to shared control helped him see that "discipline is not an emotional issue" but one of planning and curricular choice.

Only the mathematics student teacher, younger than the other three, pursued a more traditional path and continued to struggle with authority issues throughout the year. He wanted to be more informal in his personal teaching style, as he had been as a teaching assistant at the university. Yet he was constrained by the realities of

the high school students who needed more structure. Since the subject matter came so easily to him, he initially presented material in a way that rarely met the students' needs. Through self-assessment, he realized his strategies were not connecting with the students. He was teaching the *lesson* rather than the *students*.

Unlike the other three student teachers who used subject matter as a point of departure for reconceptualizing their roles, this teacher saw his transformation in terms of personal growth. "Flexibility, reflection, and self-assessment" were characteristics that he deemed necessary for his development as a teacher. Considered an excellent teacher by his cooperating teachers and students, he eventually sought a "balance between authority and freedom." In his year-end personal narrative, he reflected on the contradictions that he felt were part of the world of teaching.

#### **Engaged Novices with Bachelor's Degrees**

For the four remaining engaged novices, the routes were more torturous; yet they framed their concerns, primarily about students, subject matter, and instruction, in a directed, positive manner. This group considered teaching a matter of survival. Their year-end reflections spoke of the challenge of teaching, ups and downs, and cycles of anxiety and renewal. They considered their experiences as deeply personal. They individually noted confidence in their new found abilities. In each case they made pledges to their future students. As one student teacher who taught both history and English classes wrote:

I still ask "What am I as I stand before a classroom full of young people?" I am first a teacher. "Am I a teacher of literature? Of language? Of history then? Or government? Perhaps cultures?" Perhaps, but no, I think not. I am and hope always to be a teacher of students.

Another, a male math teacher, stated his eagerness "to teach students once again," knowing that he possesses the ability to do so. A third, an English teacher, wrote that

...student teaching is a kind of experiment and that it is all right to experiment. It is constant learning about yourself and your environment. It is success and failure, but with each success, you grow and learn a little more about yourself; therefore, it is really a new area of success.... It is seeing every one of my students' faces...and smiling.

One of these student teachers noted that the struggle and personal angst experienced by teachers in doing their jobs was not confined to those who are new or inexperienced. As she stated,

I have learned that the sweet and tidy paragraph or two devoted to struggle and personal angst experienced by teachers in doing their job is bigger and weightier than the data suggest. It is not trite or confined to new or inexperienced teachers. I have seen that the "better" you are [as a teacher], the more likely you are to struggle. I have seen also that nothing I have read (or written) on this area of a teacher's life comes close to the reality of this profession that, when at its best,



requires the kind and frequency of personal introspection that teaching does.

Although these student teachers engaged in discussions on issues of pedagogy and subject matter, they addressed these issues much later in the school year. As one English teacher explained:

I have also grown more confident in teaching my content area. Before, I felt that I knew the material since I was an English major, but I did not feel I could really teach it. This is partly due to two factors; most of my time seemed to be spent on dealing with motivation and classroom management and discipline.

Once the student teacher was more comfortable with management issues, she began to concentrate on issues of subject matter. Unlike the first group of engaged novices who had strong subject matter backgrounds and used that subject matter as their point of departure for student management, this student teacher and a math student teacher felt that challenges in management and discipline needed to be solved before they felt confident to teach.

Yet, in this group two teachers, one in science and the other in English/history, conceived of students as positive collaborators in teaching and learning. Both teachers saw their students as allies in teaching and learning. The English/history teacher emphasized her role as one who offers up the material for "the feast." Her students would then choose what was particularly attractive to them. She felt her background in literature, especially in authors and works traditionally not represented in high school curricula, was an asset to her teaching. The following comment underscores her confidence in her ability to select literature appropriate for her students. She wrote:

The assumptions regarding what students will relate to, how to woo them to the subject matter, and what skills they might really need have changed in just the time I have been at the university. This perspective colors what pieces I'm willing to jettison without hesitation.

Additionally, this same novice teacher believed that her students need "to learn that which empowers them." The learning, then, is of their making.

In the case of the science teacher, she sought out opportunities to involve students in the evaluation of her lessons. She found herself willing to take risks in trying different instructional strategies, and her students helped her to develop her teaching style. As she described,

The students were gentle in their criticism of various classroom experiences, and I grew accustomed to asking their opinions and ideas about things: I really feel that by the end of the year, the students and I had developed a team approach to learning. My identity is formed by the fact that I know more stuff, I am responsible for the class functioning and maintaining standards of behavior expected by the schools, but their observations and ideas are as valid as mine when it comes to discussions and decisions.

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### *Visions and Revisions*

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These two teachers conceptualized the work of teaching and learning as collaborative. In their year-end reflections, the two cited collaborator as one of their roles as teachers. In both instances the student teachers had collaborated with other student teachers and teachers on curricula and viewed that work as part of being a teacher. No other student teachers—engaged or disengaged—valued this aspect enough to mention it.

#### ***Disengaged Novices***

For the three disengaged novices, students were the subject of their writing. For the two English teachers, both female, the socialization of students took precedence over subject matter; for the male social studies teacher, lack of subject matter preparation in one of his classes was a concern but not above his personal frustration with developing a teaching style. He knew that he could not become a copy of either of his master teachers, but he had not found comfort in any style or role. Still grappling with issues of control and management at the year's end, the student teacher chose to continue his education rather than seek employment.

In marked contrast to the engaged novices, the disengaged novices did not develop significantly new ideas about teaching. For instance, the social studies student teacher initially thought teaching would be easy:

At the beginning, I really thought that it was going to be kind of easy. I thought, "How hard can it be to present material?" Watching the two cooperating teachers I had made it seem really easy so I thought it would be a breeze. But as the year progressed I learned that it's not as easy as it appeared. They've had a lot of experience, and it comes off to everyone else that it's easy for them.... It's just that they've been doing it for years and just by repetition they have it knocked down.

Nowhere in this narrative does the student teacher acknowledge the complexity of teaching or analyze how he might approach the task differently. He seems to believe that repetition will make him a good teacher. The disengaged novices seemed to stop where they had begun. In two cases, their year-end narratives were riddled with prescriptions about teaching written at the start of the year and reiterated at its end: they confirmed their previously held beliefs of teachers as dispensers of knowledge and teachers as role models.

Although their narratives often included students and their commitment to guiding students to make right choices, they concluded they could not reach all students. One wrote:

Even the best teacher cannot reach everyone. This was hard for me to accept. Now I believe that I will still try my hardest to work with all of my students, but if the student will not come half way then there is nothing I can do.

One student teacher did not write a final paper. Through an interview with the candidate, we found that she was seriously questioning becoming a teacher. Aside from her concerns about lesson planning and the time commitment teaching

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requires, she witnessed the tarnishing of her father's reputation as a teacher during the year. At the beginning of the school year, she wrote that her father, a teacher at the site, was the one who encouraged her to be a teacher. She strongly identified with him: "My father relates really well with high school-aged kids, and since we are alike in so many ways, I believe that I, too, can relate well with these students." Over the year, she spent considerable time in his classes outside of her own responsibilities. The demise of his reputation through school gossip and public chastisement in the local newspaper led her to re-evaluate her choice of career. She chose not to apply for a teaching position the next year.<sup>1</sup> Certainly this case reinforces the practice of not placing teaching candidates at schools of practicing relatives.

Another disengaged novice chose to continue graduate education rather than move directly into teaching. The third accepted a teaching position and, two months into her new assignment, reiterated her belief of teacher as dispenser of knowledge and role model.

### **Patterns of Professional Growth**

The general pattern of professional growth exhibited across student teachers in our study bears similarities to Frances F. Fuller's (1969) concerns-based model of beginning teacher development. The model posits different levels of concerns that preservice teachers express at various points in their teacher preparation programs. According to Fuller, in the first stage, student teachers' concerns are self-centered, unrelated to teaching, and related to personal survival. The second stage of concerns focuses on the teaching task and one's adequacy in the classroom. Concerns during the third stage center on the impact of teaching on students; teachers are concerned about issues such as meeting student needs and adapting teaching strategies to help students learn.

Narratives from our group of engaged novices initially revealed classroom organization and subject matter issues. They focused on the mechanics of teaching, such as designing lessons, acquiring teaching strategies, organizing daily tasks, and establishing routines. Subsequently, they moved to student centered issues such as their increased understanding of their students' backgrounds and the need to motivate students. This focus on students led to reflection on the nature of teaching including analysis of their teaching strategies and the role of the teacher. In deciding upon teaching strategies, the student teachers began to pay more attention to the relationships between content and pedagogy and how to transform subject matter for student understanding. In addition, in their narratives, they reflected on their own personal growth. In contrast, the disengaged novices seemed stuck on issues relating to classroom control and, later in the year, on lack of time. They did not address subject matter considerations, contextual variables, or instructional issues.

**Time Frames**

In looking for patterns of professional development, we found no common time frame within which student teachers reached common understandings. Of the four engaged novices with extensive subject-matter background, three exhibited a transition from subject-centered to student-centered issues during the first fourteen weeks; but the four other engaged novices were still struggling with subject matter and management issues. Lack of time became their overwhelming concern. The three disengaged novices wrote of no periods of personal development.

Although we found no common time frame with respect to professional development, there were similarities regarding emotional highs and lows within the school year, and some student teachers wrote about their sensitivity to the rhythms. One month into full responsibility for their assigned classes, most student teachers described being stressed or anxious. One student teacher declared that he experienced "a nervous breakdown" during the first week in March. He alleviated his stress and illness by scaling back his own expectations with regard to "being cutting edge" in curricular issues. Another student teacher was concerned about the effects of his career choice on his new marriage: he felt inundated with demands on time and energy.

**School Climate**

While the student teachers wrote about their emotional lives as teachers, reactions to the school climate or its reputation were curiously missing in most of the narratives. Most of the students had heard about the lingering negative reputation of the school stemming from several incidents many years ago. Before the start of the school year, one teacher candidate was warned by a friend to wear his "flak jacket" on campus. Another student teacher commented,

I won't say I was intimidated about coming to [this high school] but I had heard all the awful stories and rumors.... [The school] has a really bad reputation, but it's not like that anymore. It is just a typical high school, whatever that means. It is public high school in the 1990s in California.... Once you prepare yourself for that, it's really not intimidating. They are just kids.

We suspect that there are two main reasons why student teachers didn't write about issues related to school climate. First, they quickly realized that the school's reputation didn't match the reality. Second, the general school climate had relatively little effect on the most pressing issues for them as student teachers—developing and teaching lessons for specific groups of students while simultaneously completing program requirements as university students.

Most of the student teachers concentrated on their personal worlds rather than the issues facing the faculty. However, two student teachers were affected by low faculty morale stemming from an outside probe. The school had been under investigation for violating federal guidelines on gender equity in sports. The

subsequent findings by a federal agency divided the faculty, and morale was very low. Although the student teachers arrived several months before the findings became public, the ensuing discussion and remediation—faculty inservices on sexual harassment—occurred during the time that they took full responsibility for their assigned classes. Given the generally low morale of the staff, it is not surprising that at least two student teachers would be affected.

The student teacher most affected by the faculty mood was the candidate, described earlier in this paper, whose father taught at the school. In addition, a science student teacher felt she was “being sucked down into the vortex of negativity” because of negative input from veteran teachers about various aspects of school life. She wrote that she was “saved” by being placed on probation for not completing her student teacher responsibilities. Her negative attitude had been affecting her students. Additionally, her lapses in judgment stemmed from her anger over the small tasks that teachers are expected to do. Teaching, she realized, was a task-laden job; the paperwork and the “red tape” were also part of that work. After being placed on probation, she avoided further contact with others who were negative and decided to “whistle while [she] worked.” Her probationary status jogged her into reevaluation of her attitude and judgment, and her narrative provided a form of resolution. The ending to this story is a positive one: the student teacher successfully completed the program and moved into her first year of teaching, feeling well-prepared to meet its challenges.

Personal conflicts do arise in the place we call school. In writing one’s story, these temporary trials can be placed in perspective. The convention of the “happy-ending” dominated the year-end narratives.

### **Summary**

This study contributes to and supports the growing body of research on teacher narratives in three ways. First, it finds that student teachers do have the capacity for sustained, complex thinking about practice. In this study, the differences in the complexity of reflection were largely dependent on the depth of subject matter expertise rather than age or previous exposure to teaching (e.g., tutoring, substitute teaching, family members who are teachers). Furthermore, those candidates who were fully grounded in their subject matter tackled more sophisticated issues regarding practice earlier in the year. Confidence and depth in subject matter knowledge may allow student teachers to more readily develop pedagogical content knowledge—which includes “the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Rather than focusing on subject matter itself, student teachers who are confident in subject matter knowledge may be able to concentrate on transforming the subject matter for student understanding. Through reflection and evaluation of their teaching experiences, they begin to reconceptualize subject matter for the purposes of teaching.

Second, our research supports the perspective that writing personal narratives can help student teachers expand their understanding of practice and their teaching roles. Structured writing activities, such as those used in this study, allowed student teachers to explore their own histories and to rewrite them. In trying to make sense of some of the events that occurred and their concomitant emotions, the novices wrote through the times, recasting them in a more positive light. Eight of the candidates reconceptualized their roles as teachers over the course of the year. In their reconceptualizations, some believed that teaching was an art or craft, not a science; another regarded teaching as primarily social work or guidance; but most were comfortable with a multifaceted conception of teaching where the job of a teacher encompassed many roles: collaborator, facilitator, engineer of circumstances, friend, guidance counselor, parent, problem-solver, and craftsman. The majority of the student teachers supported the belief that teachers continually grow and change, and many actively sought employment in schools that would promote professional growth. As one stated: "I hope I will be able to teach in an environment where teachers are professionals who are seeking to improve their craft, where they are constantly striving to find more effective and successful ways for student to learn."

Third, early induction into a school's culture and the length of the field experience may affect the complexity of student teachers' narratives and their capacity for reflection. Many field experience components of teacher preparation programs last from ten to fourteen weeks. This simply may not be enough time for student teachers to make connections. In our study, they began their school site assignments during the teacher work days before instruction began in the fall. Their field experience spanned the entire school year—allowing them to observe and experience the full scope of teaching. As student teachers spent the full year at one school, their knowledge of the personnel, activities, and school culture deepened. Operating with knowledge of "how things work around here," student teachers were freed to deal more completely with issues of practice. Student teachers felt at ease and accepted by the faculty from the very first weeks at the site. Yet knowledge and involvement in school culture may be a double-edged sword. For two student teachers, their involvement in school culture adversely affected their performance.

In summary, personal narratives provide a fruitful mode for understanding student teachers' progress as professionals. Although the complexity of insights varies among individuals, capacity for reflective thinking is evidenced by goal-setting, problem-solving of daily issues, and reconceptualizing of teaching roles. In a professional development school setting, reflective thinking is sustained over a year of observation and practice through numerous resources; students, fellow student teachers, cooperating teachers, and supervisor—all may act as catalysts for growth.

#### **Note**

1. After traveling for a year, she returned and accepted a full-time teaching position.

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