

## **Identifying Good Student Teaching Placements: A Programmatic Perspective**

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“Practice what you preach” is an old adage in our society and, as with most old adages, the essence of its message may be worthy of our attention. What it asks of us is consistency—that there be a connection between what we say and what we do. And why is that? For one thing, it points to the power of modeling; if you really want your idea to get across, you need to demonstrate it as well as explain it. The phrase also suggests that if you feel something is necessary for others, it ought to be necessary for yourself. For all these reasons, and more, it is a message we take seriously in the Mills College Credential Program. We aim for consistency; we believe in the power of what we call, “principled practice.” We have conscientiously constructed a set of principles, which we think ought to inform the future teaching of our credential candidates if they are to work toward the goals of equity and social justice. In order to better ensure that happens, we use those same principles to guide our own practice. We want all aspects of our program—

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our structure, our courses, our assignments, our interactions, and our fieldwork—to be consistent with these principles. In recent years we have begun to question whether the student teaching portion of the program is as supportive of our efforts as we would like it to be. We had always been aware that some of our placements were “better” than others, but we had hoped that our students could learn our

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principles, with our help, in any classroom context. We realized we needed to take a more systematic look.

To take this look we designed a study that is reported in the following pages. We decided to use case studies as our research design because we wanted to get an in-depth look at what the student teaching experience was like for our candidates. We selected two students for participation—one from the secondary program, Jessica,<sup>2</sup> and one from the elementary, Sheila, so that we could consider grade level placement as a variable if it seemed to emerge as significant. Both had exceptional backgrounds that we felt prepared them well for the master's program. We chose both of these student teachers not because they were typical but because their cases offered us a good opportunity to understand the phenomenon under consideration in this study. Each of these student teachers had what seemed to be a strong placement and a weak placement so that we could look at how those differences affected the same individuals. This initial distinction was very loosely made on the basis of student teacher and supervisor reactions to the placement—on whether or not they considered it to be a generally positive and productive learning experience. A central purpose of our study was to determine if that categorization was accurate and, if so, how these definitions might be refined and understood.

One of the participants, Jessica, had the weak placement first, whereas Sheila had the strong placement first. We hoped to see whether the order mattered—was it better, worse, or inconsequential to have a weak placement before or after a strong placement? Both were identified by their supervisors as individuals whose entries in their professional journals were substantive and insightful. In addition, each was considered to exhibit considerable strength in the classroom. This was important both because it would give us access to more data, and because we wanted to see whether and how problematic placements affected our more reflective and well-prepared student teachers. If they had difficulties, we might assume that others would be even more susceptible. In other words, we selected for study two very capable student teachers first because we needed individuals who could give us access to their thinking. All student teachers process what they are learning, but not all can share it well with others. Second, most student teachers do not have the backgrounds or initial strengths that these two did. With others it might be easier to suggest that any fieldwork problems that occurred were due to their own inadequacies. If we examined the struggles of our most capable students, we should be better able to determine what about the context and structure of the student teaching experience might need changing and in what ways. Thus, what we found could be helpful in the designing of all fieldwork experiences for all types of student teachers in all kinds of programs.

We also gathered data from the Mills faculty and supervisors. We gave them a questionnaire asking them to share their views on student teaching—what it was for, what it might look like in the ideal, and what their reactions to our current circumstances were. We wanted to get a sense for how we were all conceptualizing

fieldwork and compare that to what was actually happening for our student teachers in the field.

### **The Mills Context**

In order to understand the experiences of Jessica and Sheila, one needs to know something about their context. The Mills College Credential Program, entitled Teachers for Tomorrow's Schools, is a two-year graduate program that results in a multiple subject or single subject teaching credential and a master's degree in education. The credential and half of the master's degree are completed during the first academic year. In that year credential candidates student teach in the mornings, beginning the first day of school and ending the last. Additionally, they take courses at the college in the afternoons. Each student teacher has two different placements—one in the fall and one in the spring. They have a supervisor from the college who works with them and their cooperating teachers in those assignments. The student teachers interact with and receive support from their supervisors in a variety of ways: they meet weekly with them and all others in their program group at a student teaching seminar; they are observed by them every other week; they keep a professional journal wherein they reflect on their practice which is responded to by the supervisor; and they have numerous other formal and informal interactions.

### **Program Principles**

Guided by the overarching goals of equity and social justice, the program, as we have mentioned, is organized around a set of principles that are reflected in the coursework, fieldwork, assignments, and general culture of the Mills Education community. They are:

TEACHING IS INHERENTLY MORAL WORK that must be guided by an ethic of care.

TEACHING IS REFLECTIVE WORK that requires active and systematic inquiry for learning throughout the teacher's career.

LEARNING IS DEVELOPMENTAL AND CONSTRUCTIVIST and thus teaching is best guided by those conceptions of how learners come to know.

TEACHING IS CONNECTED IN DEEP AND IMPORTANT WAYS TO SUBJECT MATTER. A central goal of the work is to prepare students to acquire, understand, and construct subject matter knowledge.

TEACHING IS COLLEGIAL in that both teachers and students learn in the context of relationships that matter. Colleagues and community are central.

TEACHING IS INHERENTLY POLITICAL in that by definition, it is concerned with matters of change that are neither neutral nor inconsequential.

### **A “Principled” View of the Ideal Student Teaching Placement**

As a starting point for our study we surveyed the faculty and supervisors to ascertain their view of the ideal student teaching placement.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly given our size and the amount of time we spend working together on program elements and plans, there was considerable agreement among the group about what might be ideal for learning conditions in the field. First on the list was that the teacher’s teaching philosophy be consistent with the principles that guide the Mills Program. We felt that the more consistency there was between the cooperating teacher’s views and practices, the better it would be as a learning context for our students. In a similar vein, it would be ideal if the student teacher could see modeled in the teaching of the cooperating teacher, the principles around which our program is designed. A second and related condition concerned the student teacher/ cooperating teacher relationship. Given the challenge of learning to teach in someone else’s classroom, and our belief that people learn by having experiences and then having the opportunity to reflect on those experiences in part by discussing them with others, we agreed that the relationship needed to be safe, supportive and conducive to that reflective conversation. Ideally, the student teacher would be able to talk freely with his/her cooperating teacher, share ideas and struggles, and learn together through a collaborative conversation about practice.

With those ideas in mind, we defined a series of four steps we hoped our student teachers would be able to take as part of their learning work in the field. In the ideal, the student teaching placement would provide our students a place where they could have multiple opportunities to: (1) *recognize* the principles in action (or notice when they were not enacted); (2) *reflect* on the circumstances that led to the enactment or lack of enactment of the principles; (3) *enact* the principles in their own practice (either literal or imagined); and (4) *embrace* the principles as one of many paradigms that will guide future teaching. We used these four steps as a coding scheme when we analyzed the student journals that were the basis for the cases that follow. We analyzed each journal entry to determine which, if any, of the steps that we thought would promote learning were present in the journal reflections. Our assessment of these settings as learning contexts for student teachers is based on our analysis of the student teachers’ journals rather than any independent review on our parts. It is our contention that though there was evidence of the Mills’ principles in the teaching that went on in both sets of classrooms for both students, the enactment of those principles made the learning opportunities for Jessica and Sheila different in each. In this article we explore how this was so, and why.

### **Case One: Jessica**

Jessica was a student in our Teachers for Tomorrow's Schools Secondary English and Social Studies Program. She brought to the experience solid subject matter preparation which she garnered through study as an undergraduate English major and her M.A. in English literature. Before entering teaching, Jessica spent several years in industry though even during this time she claims she never lost her early love for school, and her secret desire to become a teacher. She said in her application essay to the Mills credential program: "I have wanted to be a teacher since I was in Georgia Grovner's third grade class at Lockert Elementary School in Pleasanton, California." Ms. Grovner, who recognized her for the unique person she is, helped Jessica see her academic skills as "something to be celebrated," rather than a "burden that separated (her) from her classmates." For this important reason, Ms. Grovner was, and probably still is, Jessica's model of a good teacher. Jessica writes:

It has been my goal since then to become like her, and to do for my students what she did for me—to give them the confidence to realize their own talents and the tools to develop them.

Jessica followed in her mentor's footsteps immediately even as a teaching assistant in graduate school. Her supervisor at the time described her as a "rigorous" teacher and an "empathetic" one as well. Her caring approach to her teaching was guided by a "commitment to multicultural education and to finding strategies to empower students of different ethnicities and class backgrounds." Her "skills in literary studies" as well as her "solid background in literature" prepared her well. Her subject matter preparation as well as her "intellect, professionalism, and commitment to social justice" made her "exactly the kind of individual who should be encouraged to take up secondary school teaching." It was clear that when Jessica entered the Mills credential program in the fall of 1998 she brought with her a solid foundation already in place for embracing the principles that would guide her study and process of learning to teach. The data that are reported below come from her student teaching journal from the 1998-1999 school year.

#### ***Jessica's Student Teaching Placements***

As is true for almost all of her secondary credential colleagues at Mills, Jessica spent her two semesters of student teaching at two different institutions. The differences between these settings provide a good opportunity to compare and examine the role of the fieldwork context in the process of learning to teach. Her first semester placement was in a junior "honors" English classroom at a comprehensive high school near Mills. She explained in her journal that the class she taught was heterogeneous in terms of skill level even though by definition it was considered an "honors" group since "(h)onors at American High is self-selected." Contributing to the feeling of heterogeneity was the diverse student population at

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American High which serves families of a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most of American High's students are working and middle class.

Jessica's cooperating teacher, Randy, was a Mills graduate with seven years of teaching experience. She was chair of her department, and the fact that she taught the honors classes was an indicator of her high status. It was clear to us in our placing Jessica with her that the two had much in common. Both had MA's in English, and both were writers. We thought the placement for Jessica was perfect.

Second semester, Jessica moved to a middle school "core" position teaching a combined language arts and social studies curriculum at Milford Middle School. Though in a more urban setting than American High, the distinctions between institutions regarding their urban/suburban status are fairly arbitrary; all of the public schools in the Oakland metropolitan area have very diverse student populations. At Milford the percentage of African American students is higher than at American High where the diversity is mostly Latino and South East Asian. Like the American High families, those at Milford are mostly working or middle class.

Dory, Jessica's Milford cooperating teacher, has also been teaching seven years though this is only her third at Milford. A cooperating teacher for Mills for all three of those years, Dory is well known in our community for teaching that reflects her commitment to social justice. Jessica explained in her journal that in Dory's classroom "every assignment and every unit is to enhance the students' ability to independently evaluate information, think critically, and reach sound conclusions." She wants "each student to feel welcome and safe" so that all can participate equally in the academic program that is organized to teach students "the skills and ideas they need to be historians and literary critics." Jessica was captivated by Dory's commitment to rigorous subject matter folded under the umbrella of social justice. Like Randy the semester before, Dory "cares deeply about her students." We thought that we had made another perfect match.

How teachers enact the ethic of care is a useful entry point for considering classrooms as learning contexts for student teachers. From Jessica's case, we are reminded that the ethic of care can result in very different classroom actions. Though Dory and Randy shared with Jessica a deep caring commitment to the success of their students, their interpretations of this belief as a guide for action were very different and showed in their responses to the Mills' principles and in their answers to the questions that frame them: How do people learn? What do students need to know? What is school for?

Early in the semester, Randy described her American High students to Jessica as "militantly ignorant." She judged them to be generally unmotivated and this appellation extended to a lesser extent to her honors students. Believing that they had neither the time nor the will to construct their own knowledge using the techniques she learned in her teacher preparation program at Mills, she chose a direct instruction approach for her teaching. Randy seemed to believe that to "teach with care" was to provide students with what she knows about particular pieces of literature and about

writing, and to make certain they come to know that information. In contrast, Dory's interpretation of "care" was to direct a classroom where students construct their own knowledge rather than acquire the "expert" knowledge of the teacher.

### **Semester One**

An examination of the data from Jessica's first semester journal provides a window to her early efforts to accomplish the four goals described above: *recognition* of the principle, *reflection* on it, opportunity to *enact* it (or imagine enacting it), and the beginnings of an *embrace* of the principle. From the start, Jessica *recognized* that Randy employed a very "directive" approach with her students. Though this appeared different from what she was learning in her course work at Mills, Jessica was open to learning from Randy and eager to understand her approach. She wrote in her journal in early September:

She is very directive, which is good now, because it's the second day of school and they really don't know what it means for them to be in Junior Honors English, studying American Literature. She is asking them to think very hard about very complex notions which adults haven't worked out over centuries of thought, such as the American Dream and the dilemma of individual vs. communal identity. So I guess it is only fair to guide them to these discussions, to give them some way in by asking specific questions.

As she *reflected* more, she raised new questions: "Yet I wonder how teachers, in composing thoughtful, provocative questions, keep from crossing the line between guiding a student into deeper thought or leading her to a conclusion not necessarily her own." She wondered whether Randy's directive approach to instruction made sense. Given how short the students' answers were in comparison to Randy's monologues, she surmised that Randy did more of the thinking in class than her students did. She wondered if maybe this was necessary given Randy's assessment of her students' motivation. In her journal she pondered:

It's certainly a surer, safer thing to be directive—to ask a question for which there are only a few possible answers. Yet I wonder if it's not also a bit limiting for discussion, and off-putting for students.

Whereas Jessica began the semester with an open mind about what she could learn from her placement with Randy, her journal revealed that it took a frighteningly short time for the stage to be set for her disengagement. The disconnect between what she encountered in her course work and what she saw in Randy's classroom was stark and confusing. She wrote in a journal entry only one week later, "I just feel like I know less about teaching and about what I'm supposed to be learning in this placement than I did two weeks ago." She continued,

I am hoping that some of this is just normal stress, and after talking to two friends from Mills today, I do think that. But I also feel as if what happens in Randy's classroom is totally divorced from my experiences and readings in class.



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We hoped Jessica's *reflection* would bring her to the conclusion that she could learn from this experience in spite of these differences. Sadly, this was not to be the case; instead, she explained:

I can't see myself taking over in these circumstances at any time. I wouldn't begin to know what to do because I can't begin to understand why Randy does what she does with the kids.<sup>4</sup>

Jessica's struggle to learn from her field placement continued through the remainder of the semester in much the same fashion. She continued to *recognize* factors in the classroom that mirrored the Mills principles, but in almost all instances the enactments she witnessed were the flip side of the perspectives she was considering in her course work. For about six weeks of this placement, she hung on a precipice on which she attempted to reconcile the disparate "voices of experience" she heard. Her journal entries during this time reflected a continuous battle between what she heard in her classes and what she saw in practice.

Around the six to eight week point in the semester, both Jessica's supervisor and her advisor had engaged in many conversations with Jessica about her placement and how it might be renegotiated to provide more learning opportunities for her. Our initial thought was to arrange more time for Jessica to teach on her own. Given her view that she had to control what the students heard and did, Randy was reluctant to turn the class over to Jessica in spite of her earlier agreement to do so. At the same time, Jessica's mounting confusion about teaching—confusion clearly associated with the circumstances of this field placement—made her reluctant to want to take over the class. We suggested to both Jessica and Randy that we place Jessica elsewhere in a situation where she would have more opportunity to teach. These conversations resulted in Jessica deciding that she wanted to stay with Randy, and Randy opening some new opportunities for her in this setting.

Nevertheless, considerable damage had been done by this point with regards to Jessica's sense of hope in education, and her belief that she was "cut out" to do this work. Jessica's journals revealed a disturbing shift from trying to make sense of what she was seeing, to questioning herself and the enterprise of teaching. She seemed not to be able to reconcile the discrepancies between what she saw in practice and what she believed. She reasoned that if Randy was right that teaching honors students needed to be largely "telling," then perhaps teaching was not for her; the compromise was too great. The turning point away from hope came in early October as she prepared to lead the class in a writing activity. She explained in her journal:

I said something to the effect of the kids needing to learn that a thesis was not a yes or no answer but rather an interpretation, and Randy said, "Oh no, a thesis is a yes or no answer. It's not a simple yes or no answer, but the conclusion it draws must, ultimately, be able to be proven right or wrong." She said that she knew this was formulaic and not at all asking them to be interpretive; when I suggested that it might



be interesting (I didn't mention more difficult and educative) to teach them to argue a more ambiguous point, she said, "They can't handle ambiguity." Ugh.

Jessica left this conversation defeated. Rather than drawing on what she was learning in her courses and with her colleagues, she became resigned to Randy's view of teaching. Without much further reflection—and with almost no consideration of her doctor's advice that she take a couple of days rest—she wrote in her journal:

I'm going to try to go tomorrow. I want to see if I can do this, if I can teach these kids to write in a way that I think is ultimately detrimental to their development. Perhaps this is my "baptism by fire" into the dilemma of needing to teach to tests? Sigh.

From this entry on, Jessica's journal reflects her sad surrender. Though her journal revealed considerable conversation with her supervisor about how she might frame the experience differently, it is clear that she was not able to sustain a revised or reframed view. From that point on, her journal entries were almost all at the *recognition* level. There was very little reflection on the principles or on what she was observing. There was only one example of an intention to *enact* the principles which, importantly, came from observing a class of Randy's where her teaching approach was "non-honors" and therefore more "constructivist and open." Aside from that one moment of hope, there were no other entries that revealed any plans to *enact* the principles in her teaching. Rather than *embrace* the principles, which is ironically probably exactly what she did initially and what may have led to her despair, she began to consider leaving the profession.

Jessica's post-placement reflection in December revealed that part of the struggle for her came in trying to understand how Randy could be a Mills graduate and teach as she did. She saw Randy as a reflective teacher, but the outcome of this reflection was the polar opposite of what Jessica imagined it would be. More importantly, it was opposite to the conclusions about teaching and learning that she came to herself. Having gained some distance from the situation, she was able to see that Randy's teaching came from a particular interpretation of the principles. It was this interpretation rather than the principles themselves that Jessica could then reject. As she later wrote, "There were some key elisions and perversions of the principles, and I think that caused many of the problems with the placement."

### **Semester Two**

A little rest over the winter holiday, and a new placement at Milford Middle School seemed to restore Jessica to her more hopeful and reflective self. Her first journal entry, though brief, signaled renewed hope. She began by contrasting the classroom management issues that come along with seventh graders as compared with high school juniors. In contemplating the challenge ahead, Jessica noted Dory's "strict" and yet "caring" management approach. Jessica wondered, "How did she do this?" Early in this second semester as she experienced a positive enactment of what she believed and hoped to accomplish in her own classroom, Jessica seemed

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to step back into a *reflective* mode. Her question “How does she do this?” implied a *recognition* that in Dory’s approach, there was something to which she could aspire. Her early journals second semester suggested that the doors for learning were open again.

Jessica described Dory’s classroom as a warm and inviting place where the ownership of knowledge was shared and students were expected to contribute their perspective to the construction of new ideas. Among those students was Jessica, herself:

She views me, other teachers, the students, parents, and administrators as colleagues and partners in the work of our classroom. As I mentioned above, she asks the kids for feedback in their reflections on what is and isn’t working about the curriculum, the instruction, and the classroom environment. She and several other 7th grade teachers meet weekly to discuss how the students are doing.

By inviting the views of others into the classroom conversation, Dory communicated to Jessica an openness to her ideas—a willingness to co-construct teacher knowledge in the same way she co-constructed subject matter knowledge with her students.

From this point on, Jessica’s journal is filled with both *recognition* and *reflective* content. She identified corresponding or non-corresponding moments of practice (*recognition*), and followed that identification with *reflection* about what she had seen. In all of the remaining journal entries, there was discussion of how she hoped to *enact* what she was learning in the classroom, or a *reflection on what she did enact* as a result of her emerging ideas about practice. Laced throughout was evidence of her *embracing* the principles as well.

The following set of entries demonstrate Jessica’s movement from recognition to reflection as well as her growing confidence in herself, her ways of knowing, and her decision to become a teacher. These entries focus on her reaction to a group of girls in her class.

I am afraid to write this next entry, because it forces me to ask some hard, ugly questions of myself. I notice that the students with whom I’m having the most difficulty in my new placement are the girls, and, moreover, the African American girls. They seem to be the ones who get most of my negative attention.

In the safe context of her placement where questioning one’s reactions to experience is part of the culture, Jessica seemed to be able to take the risk necessary for learning. She wrote:

I’m wondering if they really are the most disruptive students, or if I am just noticing their bad behavior more than the other students’. I am perplexed by this phenomenon, and left wondering what’s causing it: Some old, heretofore unknown racism residing deep in me? Are the students and I playing out some weird battle of cultural conventions here, as Perry Gilmore described in his article “Gimme Room: School Resistance, Attitude, and Access to Literacy”?

Her *reflection* continued with a commitment to search for clarity about her reaction to these particular students. Her self-interrogation was guided towards future *enactment*. She wrote, "If this is the case, I really need to figure out where the girls and I are coming from so that I can ensure we are all on the path we need to be on."

Stepping back from the situation Jessica reflected on her own values and motivations. Her process demonstrates the opportunity the placement offered her to *embrace* the principles that guide her practice, and the opportunity to *reflect* on what she believes and what she wants to do. In her journal she explained:

I really do want to do right by all my students, which means that when they are behaving inappropriately, I feel a moral obligation to call them on it. However, I need to be sure that the kids are really behaving badly, and that I'm not just reacting inappropriately to behavior I don't understand. Maybe 13 year old girls, particularly African American girls, are just by nature short and rude with the adults they know; maybe treating their teachers, their peers, and their work as unfair, ugly burdens to be borne is just part of a thirteen year old girl's development.

She ended this entry with a plan of action:

I guess my next step is to figure out two things in order to figure out how to proceed with these girls: (1) Are these girls really acting inappropriately, or am I overreacting to their behavior because I don't understand it? (2) How can I give the girls the support, the structure, and the discipline they need at this point in their development, while keeping my own blood pressure and sanity intact?

Jessica's second semester placement provided a true learning context for her. Questions rather than answers were the valued commodity, and the context was safe enough for the questions to be both posited and explored. In this place where she could learn, it seemed that her sense of hope was restored. She attributed this growth to being in a placement where she and her colleague teacher shared a view of the purpose of teaching. "Suddenly, everything I'm learning at Mills makes sense," she wrote. It made sense to her because she saw in her colleague an approach to teaching that reflected not only the principles she was pondering at Mills, but a blending of those principles in pursuit of excellent outcomes for all students. She wrote:

I had a hard time sorting out what from Dory's classroom was an example of teaching as a political act, from an example of content knowledge, or the ethic of care, or collegiality, etc. In other words, the principles are all interwoven in her classroom. I think that is so because what interconnects each of the principles is what informs and inspires Dory's teaching: the fundamental belief that teachers can create equal opportunities for success and achievement, as well as equal outcomes, if we create classrooms that have faith in our kids and our future. This belief is the essential distinction between my two placements: one teacher has it and the other does not. While both cooperating teachers enact the principles in their classrooms, Dory seems optimistic about her kids' abilities to change their futures, given the opportunity and the tools to do so.

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### **Concluding Thoughts**

The six principles that guide our program are conceptualized to frame learning as the primary focus of teaching. This includes both student learning and teacher learning. What Jessica's case reveals is that unless learning is the central purpose of teaching, the other principles can be misconstrued and lead to conditions that interfere with learning. Jessica's case also reveals that the conception of learning itself is problematic rather than given. Depending on one's view of learning, the act of teaching occurs in different ways.

In our view, learning is an act of construction and the learners are the constructors who make meaning for themselves in response to the learning challenges they face. The remaining Mills program principles fall into this learning-centered conception of teaching by defining *how the process is accomplished* (with others/colleagues, through the processes of inquiry and reflection) and *for what purpose* (moral and social purposes as well as—or in combination with—the acquisition of rigorous subject matter knowledge).

In Jessica's first semester placement the operative conception of learning was not constructivist. Rather than ask students (both the high school students and the student teacher) to engage in making meaning, they were asked to absorb meaning others had made for them. Since the meaning of teaching Randy had made for Jessica was so incomprehensible, foreign, and reprehensible in some ways, her engagement was interrupted thus interrupting her learning as well. The conditions of this learning context left Jessica with feelings of confusion, guilt, and despair because she could not conform to the learning requirements imposed. To survive, she had to disengage.

In the second semester, when the conditions for learning were reversed and Jessica was invited into an exchange of her own making, she re-engaged with the process and took hold of a new feeling of hope. In this second semester placement, the principles were enacted not only in a form recognizable to Jessica, but in a way that surfaced many new questions for her to ponder. Not long into the process she began to imagine enacting those principles in her own practice. Shortly thereafter, when her teaching responsibilities increased, Jessica found herself enacting the very principles she herself was constructing. She provides a closing summary in her journal:

When I worked with Randy, I was very pessimistic about my ability to contribute to, or even stay in, the profession. Now that I am working with Dory, I have hope for my kids' outcomes and faith in my ability to make a positive contribution to their lives. Since student teachers' fieldwork provides the context for us to apply the theories we learn in classes, a classroom that embodies the Mills principles with hope and goodwill, such as Dory's, is the key to successful teacher learning.

## **Case Two: Sheila**

Sheila was a student in the Multiple Subject Credential Program. She came to us with a strong academic and experiential background. In addition to her undergraduate degree in History, she had both a Master's degree and an Educational Specialist Degree in Science Education. Thus, Sheila had both depth and breadth in her subject matter preparation, a real asset for an elementary candidate. Sheila also spent eight years working in a variety of venues, including elementary classrooms, as a science educator and researcher. One of her reference writers said of her,

Sheila is a dedicated and hard working teacher. Visiting her classroom is a joy! She creates situations where students actively participate in the learning process. . . . Sheila is an asset to our staff. She sets a tone of mutual respect, professional collegiality and friendliness. . . . She is intelligent, knowledgeable and dedicated. Best of all, she truly loves children!

In her application essay, Sheila said that she had "chosen to apply to the Mills College teacher education program because of its emphasis on inquiry-based, reflective teaching practice, facilities for the study of early childhood development at the Children's School, and its commitment to working with diverse populations in urban public schools, to schools that strive for equity and access for all children." Sheila seemed to have a head start on most of the Mills program principles before she arrived, and thus seemed well situated to derive maximum benefit from the experience. Like Jessica was an exceptionally well prepared teacher candidate.

### ***Sheila's Student Teaching Placements***

Elementary candidates are required to spend one semester in a primary classroom (K-3) and one in an upper elementary classroom (4-6). Four of the students in the program have the opportunity to student teach in the Mills College laboratory school. This is a popular option because by definition the situation is designed for the purpose of teacher education. The final decision is made by lottery. Sheila's name was drawn to be a student teacher in the K/1 classroom during the fall semester. The philosophy that guides the Mills Children's School is very similar to that which guides the credential program; the same principles are a part of the on-going conversation. The children in the school come from the surrounding community, and despite the private school status, they do represent a range on the socioeconomic continuum. Fifty per cent of the students in that K/1 classroom are students of color.

Sheila's cooperating teacher, Connie, was a Mills graduate with five years of teaching experience. She was, therefore, especially well versed in the credential program's philosophies and structures. Connie had taught in the public schools for three years before joining the Children's School staff, which meant she could make connections between the private and the public school contexts. It would be hard to imagine a more ideal placement for Sheila.

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For her second semester, Sheila was placed in a fifth grade at Ellis Elementary School in a local urban district. The school was recently rebuilt and had been designed to foster collaboration among students, staff, and community. Ellis had just received a grant to become a science magnet school, which, of course, had particular appeal to Sheila. The student population is very diverse and includes many Spanish-speakers. The socioeconomic status also represents a range but is generally below that of the Mills Children's School. According to Sheila, there were "concerns throughout the school about students' very low scores on standardized tests such as the SAT 9. Many teachers are also extremely frustrated with what they describe as uncooperative and disrespectful student behavior."

Alice, Sheila's cooperating teacher, had been teaching for about fifteen years, most of that time in the same district and with this age group. She was, as was everyone, new to this particular school—a school still very much involved in the process of inventing itself. Alice was struggling with the same issues her colleagues had regarding test scores and student behavior. Sheila wrote,

Alice is aware that her current approach to teaching is not meeting her goals. She told me she is in the process of reevaluating her teaching and that she wants to start next year differently. She has expressed a wish that she could reach more of her students and is struggling with how to make this happen. She has been participating in various forms of professional development that has exposed her to new teaching strategies, some of which she is beginning to implement. Her courage to admit that what once seemed to work for her no longer does, and that she is ready to become involved in the process of change, is very significant.

Alice was a relatively new cooperating teacher for us so we did not know a lot about her when making the placement. Her receptivity as well as the context led us to believe that this would be a good situation for Sheila.

The differences between Sheila's two student teaching placements turned out to be enormous. Our intent is not to explore the reasons behind these differences, but to examine the contexts in terms of their ability to serve as opportunities for Sheila to learn the program principles. From her perspective, all six principles were an integral part of the K/1 classroom in the Mills Children's school. The cooperating teacher was consistent in her enactment of them both with the children and with her. In contrast, Sheila seemed to think that none of the principles were present in the fifth grade setting at Ellis. Although the teacher did seem aware of and concerned about some of them, particularly the ethic of care, she did not operationalize them in her practice either with the students or with Sheila. How did Sheila respond to these different contexts? How did they seem to influence her ability to *recognize*, *reflect upon*, *enact*, and *embrace* the program principles?

#### **Semester One**

Sheila's first semester journal entries indicate that her placement with Connie afforded her the opportunity to accomplish all four of the program goals: *recognition*,

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*reflection, enactment, and embracing.* Indeed evidence that this was happening appeared very early. In the second week in September, she made the following entry:

I think my temptation in the past as a teacher has been to give children the “answers” because I haven’t known how to provide them with the kind of guidance that helps them get to the next level. I realize that the struggle they go through in learning is important, and that it is essential that the learning is “theirs.” Finding the balance between letting children figure things out for themselves and create their own meaning, while providing them with the kind of support that is helpful in this process has felt difficult for me to achieve. Working on finding this balance is one of my goals as a student teacher.

In this instance Sheila *recognized* a set of circumstances relevant to constructivist/developmental learning theory, which is itself noteworthy. *Recognition* of this principle is often a long time in coming for many of our student teachers. But she did not stop there; she *reflected* upon the implications of what she had witnessed. She reconsidered her previous practice in light of this experience and came to a new realization about the learning process. And she took it even further; by the end of the passage, she *embraced* the principle by identifying it as a goal of her student teaching.

Just three days later Sheila’s journal shows her exploring the principles of teaching as a political act and teaching as moral work based upon an ethic of care. She began by describing an incident wherein one of the children had been telling the class about his last soccer game when he played against a team of “Spanish guys.” Both she and Connie had detected a “derogatory tone in his voice.” Sheila “was really interested in the way Connie handled the situation. It seemed like she was able to help Doug and the class reflect on his comment without making him defensive.” She ended the entry with the following statement:

The discussions we have been having in Tomas’s class have heightened my awareness of the ways that both students and teachers use language and what it reflects about their values and beliefs. It has also forced me to think about how I use language when I speak with children. I know that sometimes I wish I had used a different tone or choice of words to communicate with students and even with other teachers. . . . I want to spend more time examining the way that language is used in the classroom.

Sheila seemed to *recognize* that political issues—questions of morality and equity—were inherent in this situation and she drew upon her experiences in one of the Mills classes to do so. This led her to *reflect* upon the way in which she communicated with children. She then decided to take action—to *enact* the principles—by examining the way language was used in the classroom.

*Recognition* without *reflection* seldom occurred in these journal entries, but Sheila clearly had help from her Mills coursework, her supervisor, and her cooperating teacher in doing so. In an entry in mid-October, she spoke very explicitly about this process. A reading in one of her courses, “Pitfalls of Experience in Teacher Preparation” by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985), had triggered a *reflection*



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on her own experience: “The familiarity pitfall is one that I think I have been struggling with since I began at the Children’s School, and I am concerned it is interfering with my ability to be reflective about my student teaching experiences.” Here she was *reflecting* on her own reflective process. She followed this with an aside to her supervisor: “Dana, you and I have had some discussions about this issue before.” She proceeded to describe the similarities between her elementary school experiences, which she felt were very beneficial for her, and her current classroom and to acknowledge that what worked for her may not work for everyone—a very important step in the development of a teacher.

What her deliberations make clear is that the high degree of compatibility between Sheila and her placement could actually be a barrier to reflection. Without the course reading and interaction with her supervisor through her journal and conversation, she might not have raised questions about the universal value of what she was experiencing.

By the end of October, Sheila’s entries were consistently exemplary of the developmental process we envision for our student teachers. She not only *recognized* the principles in the context, she engaged in substantive *reflection* on their meaning for her beliefs and practices, she described instances of her *enactment* of the principles, and she *embraced* them as guides for her future practice. The following entry is representative:

The Mills program is really pushing me to question my own assumptions about what are appropriate concepts for children to be learning and what my goals as a teacher are. . . . I am feeling more and more that I need to justify my decisions for myself and for others and I think it is a really important process to go through. It ultimately makes teaching more meaningful for me and hopefully increases the educational potential of lessons for students. For example, I have a sense from my experiences teaching science last year, from different curricular guides and frameworks, and from Linda’s developmental psych. class that classifying and sorting are thinking processes that are important to begin developing during the primary school years. I am thinking about working on these skills in the context of the bird investigation that I am creating for the k/1 class. As a result of developing this particular lesson I have been thinking a lot about not only what happens when children sort and classify but also what they do with these experiences. . . . Is it enough to just “do” the sorting? . . . I am interested in learning more about the significance of sorting and classifying for young children since, in many ways, it seems like a “traditional” activity that is uncritically accepted as part of the elementary school curriculum.

Most of Sheila’s journal entries not only included multiple examples of the process; they also contained clues as to what had made the process possible for her. One of the impetuses for reflection came from a “difficult” teaching experience that was observed and debriefed by her supervisor and discussed in the daily noontime meeting with Connie and her fellow student teachers<sup>5</sup>:

As a result of this lesson initially being so difficult for me to teach, I have ended up

learning more about it than about many of the other activities I have worked on this semester. Much of the learning that went on for me was about the cognitive abilities and limitations of children of this age. I saw evidence of much of the preoperational thinking that we have been learning about in Linda's class. This experience also made me realize how important it is to have colleagues to problem solve with and to help you gain insight into the many challenges of teaching children.

The significance of this opportunity to learn from a less than satisfactory lesson is made apparent in her post-placement reflections in December:

One of the most significant and meaningful aspects of my experience as a student teacher at the Children's School was observing and participating in the creation of a safe, respectful community of learners. I saw over and over again how children could feel empowered by having ownership of the learning process. Being part of this type of learning environment helped me to take the risks I needed to as a student teacher. I developed ownership of the teaching process because I had the opportunity to adapt lessons and to develop curricular units based on rationales that I had constructed. Developing ownership of the teaching process was possible because of the opportunity to take risks and to engage in reflective practice with my colleagues at the Children's School.

The consistency between the philosophies of the Children's School and the teacher education program is undoubtedly another reason that this first semester placement may have functioned as a true learning context for Sheila. In looking back on her experience she claimed that all of the principles were not only present, they were interrelated: We were all optimistic that the second semester placement would provide a different, yet equally beneficial, opportunity for Sheila to continue to learn and grow, however, that was not to be the case.

### **Semester Two**

Very early in the second semester, signs of trouble began to appear, as is apparent in an entry written during the third week of her placement in which Sheila raised questions about their teaching of a civil rights unit during Black History Month:

It seems pretty clear that Alice and I have fallen into the pitfall of using this "additive approach"... Banks has pushed me to think about how some of the issues and themes that have emerged from this unit could be extended beyond this month and examined more deeply over a longer period of time. At least half the class is African-American. What kind of message are we sending to say that we will only study their history for one month and then we will get back to the "standard" curriculum on explorers and discoverers?

Other comments in the passage made it apparent that not only were there some disconnects between what she was experiencing in her coursework and in her fieldwork, she was also uncertain about what to do about it.

Shortly thereafter, Sheila wrote more extensively about these anxieties. She reiterated her concerns about the classroom climate and then related a story about

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a disturbing occasion in which a student was humiliated because he could not answer one of the teacher's questions. She described her reactions in this way:

I think this and other similar incidents have made me feel like this classroom is not a place where it is safe to take risks, to say, "I don't understand" and to feel that it's okay not to have the "right" answer. I have many other examples of this from these first few weeks. I wonder if this climate is making me as a student teacher feel very inhibited about trying new things. I think I fear that Alice will direct the same criticism at me that I see her directing towards her students. The thought of children being afraid of making mistakes makes me feel very sad. This classroom feels very foreign to me.

Though Sheila was still *recognizing* the presence, or more accurately, the absence of the principles and attempting to *reflect* on the implications of that absence, she was beginning to doubt the possibility of *enactment*.

Almost all of Sheila's remaining entries stayed at the *recognition* level. Most were *recognitions* of a mismatch between program principles and her placement classroom. This was in stark contrast to the complex, thoughtful and inclusive (of all four levels) passages from the previous semester. In one of only two instances of *reflection* that did appear, Sheila focused more on the dilemma created by the placement than on the meaning and implications of developmental learning theory for her current or future practice:

I wonder if my experience as a student teacher in Alice's class is similar to her students' experiences. She has this very administrative approach to teaching. I often feel like she would rather teach it, and teach it efficiently, rather than risk my doing a slightly "messier" job. In a similar way it seems like she would rather tell students how to do something than give them the opportunity to discover it for themselves and to share this process with the class. If my analysis of Alice's general approach to teaching is accurate it doesn't seem to support constructivist learning very well. . . . I also need to think seriously about how I am going to incorporate more constructivist based approaches to learning into the curriculum when the structure and support for that approach may not be there.

She raised the question of *enactment* but she had no idea how that might happen in this context; indeed she felt she might be at risk if she were to do so:

She talks to me a lot about the *what* of her teaching but rarely about the *why*. To learn more about the why I am going to have to ask many more questions of Alice. I have been reluctant to do this because early in my placement she was quite defensive when I asked questions about her curricular or classroom management decisions. This is not conducive to reflective interactions between the two of us.

Sheila did not engage in much *reflection*, was hesitant to *enact*, and spoke not at all of *embracing*<sup>7</sup> because the context did not feel safe to Sheila and, from her perspective, it did not seem safe for the students either. Nor did she believe the principles were evident.

In one of her last entries, a ray of hope appeared as Sheila noted a change of

atmosphere—“a sense of community that I haven’t often experienced.” The primary reason for that seemed to be a new classroom management system that she and Alice had implemented which was suggested and designed by Sheila. She had finally taken the risk to *enact*—to try to put into practice a pedagogical strategy based more on an ethic of care and collegiality than anything currently in operation and, as a result, had begun to transform the experience for herself. According to subsequent comments from her and her supervisor, things continued to improve.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

One way to characterize the distinction between Sheila’s two placements is that one was a positive exemplar of the program principles and one was a negative exemplar. In her first semester she was able to see the principles in action and in the second she was not. In the latter instance then she had to try to envision on her own what such principled practice might look like in that context. Fortunately however, she was not on her own; she still had her coursework, colleagues, and supervisor to support her in the process. Sheila concluded her reflective analysis of her student teaching experiences halfway through her second placement this way:

While I felt safe and able to take risks in my teaching at the Children’s School, the fact that I haven’t in Alice’s class has forced me to confront things in myself that are important to address. The nature of my current placement has also required me to consider some of the following questions, “How will I respond when certain contextual factors threaten to interfere with my philosophy of teaching and learning? How can I take the risks necessary to have ownership of my teaching when I may not have the support for doing this?” I have found that the characteristics of each of my two placements have highlighted different strengths and weaknesses in my teaching abilities. For this reason I think both of my placements have involved a tremendous amount of learning and hopefully will lead to my growth as a teacher as well.

Sheila felt that one of the main reasons she was able to learn from her second placement was because her Mills supervisor provided her with so much support: “When I despaired, she helped me see the educative potential of this experience.”

Nonetheless, it is clear that Sheila’s learning process was significantly interrupted by the new placement. Journal entries that had been replete with *reflection*, *enactment*, and *embracing* regressed to mere *recognition*, and negative *recognition* at that. The focus of what little *reflection* did occur was more upon her struggles with the placement itself than with her own developing philosophies. The primary reason for the arrested development seemed to be an absence of safety. Because the situation did not reflect our program principles, efforts to try to enact them in that classroom would require and result in a significant change. Those efforts may or may not have been successful; either way was risky business. If Sheila failed, she might be subjected to the same kind of humiliation she feared the students felt. If she succeeded, Alice might become defensive—even the proposal of alternatives might be experienced by her as a criticism.

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Though Sheila lost confidence, at least temporarily, she never questioned her own decision to go into teaching. She wondered about how she might go about enacting the principles in this particular context, but she did not seem to question the merits or possibilities of the principles themselves. But Sheila was in her second semester, she had substantial support from the program, and she entered with a strong educational and practical background. Sheila was already well on her way to understanding and embracing the program principles when she arrived. If the regression in both her thought and her action were as substantial as it appeared to be in her journal entries, what might it be like for other student teachers, most of whom have not had her educational experience? Since research has shown that teachers tend to teach like their cooperating teachers regardless of whether they agreed with them at the time, what might be the long-term repercussions of this negative exemplar?

### **Fieldwork As A Learning Context: Four Dimensions**

From these cases we have identified four dimensions of student teaching placements that seem to render them learning contexts for teaching. In discussing these dimensions, we attempt to make clear our view of how each connects with our program principles, and how it contributes (or does not contribute) to the learning potential of the fieldwork experience.

#### ***Nested Learning***

Early on in our analysis it became clear to us that an important indicator of whether a particular classroom might be a good learning context for our student teachers was whether it was a good learning context for children. It seems to us that those principles that frame learning for children (constructivist/developmental learning theory, reflection, and collegiality) frame learning for student teachers as well. Jessica's and Sheila's journals suggest that those classrooms where the children are invited into learning conversations with their peers and with the teacher are the same classrooms where the student teachers felt invited into learning conversations about the work of teaching. Similarly, in those situations where children were less involved as co-constructors of knowledge, the student teachers were less involved in the construction of knowledge about teaching.

The journals of both student teachers revealed that they reflected on both the learning context for their students and for themselves. Sheila discussed her setting as a classroom where the students were given few opportunities to "reveal who they are" or to "personalize the curriculum" because Alice was worried that the students "cover the material." Likewise, Jessica mentioned Randy's "directive" teaching style which Randy argued was necessary if the students were to learn all that they needed to learn in honors English. According to Jessica, Randy considered constructivist learning theory a "nice idea," but "completely unrealistic in a

modern, urban, heterogeneous class . . . with students from such a wide variety of backgrounds.”

The notion of leading students to a foregone conclusion and limiting discussion suggests a learning context where reflection is not prized and where the teacher preempts the making of meaning. This is an issue that Sheila directed us to consider when she asked in her journal if her experience “as a student teacher in Alice’s class is similar to her students’ experiences” in that same room.

An important point is raised by this idea of nested contexts of learning in a student teaching placement classroom. If the argument we are suggesting here is true, and the conditions for learning that frame the experience of children in a particular classroom mirror those that frame the learning opportunities for student teachers, it is possibly also true that the conditions for learning for the teacher herself, are similarly defined. Another way for us to frame this argument would be to consider as a criterion for student teaching placement classrooms where there is evidence that the teachers themselves are learners about their practice. In those classrooms where teachers are learners about their practice, student teachers can be learners about their practice as well.

### ***Blending Principles***

When we conceptualized the principles, we envisioned them as interconnected parts of a whole. Our study brought to our attention how important these connections are to creating a student teaching placement that “works.” The data of these two case studies reveal that the student teachers searched for evidence of all of the principles in their fieldwork settings, and it was those settings where a composite of the principles was present that most student teacher learning occurred. Jessica spoke to this directly in describing Dory’s classroom: “I realize that I had a hard time sorting out what from Dory’s classroom was an example of teaching as a political act, from an example of content knowledge, or the ethic of care, or collegiality, etc.”

In the nested learning discussion above, we argued that settings where children are offered multiple opportunities for constructing knowledge are probably the same settings as those where student teachers will have opportunities for constructing knowledge. These settings are also likely to contain opportunities for collegiality and reflection since collegiality and reflection go hand in hand with powerful learning of a constructivist type. There are moral considerations to this approach to knowledge construction as well. Shelia provides a good example of this when she describes how Connie emphasizes “ownership” in the learning context she creates: If students are free to make their own sense of things, then what they think and believe is probably valued in the context of the school.

### ***Safety***

A place where one’s ideas and beliefs are valued suggests a place where safety is the norm. Student teachers need to feel safe if they are to move beyond the

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*recognition* of program principles into the processes of *reflecting* on them, *enacting* them in their teaching, and *embracing* some construction of them into their own practice. This dimension of safety suggests that student teachers need to be comfortable enough to take risks—to try out things they have not tried before in contexts that are not of their own making, nor under their full control. They need to feel supported in asking questions and exploring optional interpretations and responses. In their successful placements, both Jessica and Sheila describe situations where they either tried untested interventions or raised and explored hard questions about challenging issues. We found that this did not tend to occur in the difficult placements.

Only Sheila spoke very explicitly about the importance of safety or its absence to her development as a teacher. In her journals the word appears with great frequency both when she is describing the students' situation or her own. She emphasizes how much feeling safe contributed to her learning in the Children's School and how its absence at Ellis interfered with her progress: "The atmosphere in the classroom was not conducive to taking risks and it did not feel safe. I did not sense students had the freedom to express their misconceptions, confusion or questions. This made me feel very inhibited during my first few weeks in Alice's class and I continue to struggle with this."

Interesting questions arise as to why Sheila discussed this issue so directly and so often and Jessica did not. It could be due to differences in personality, individual need or priority. It could also be due to the nature of the incompatibility the student teachers felt in the difficult settings where they worked. Here, the theme of "nested-learning" contexts seems connected. If the classroom is unsafe for students, the learning situation is also unsafe for the student teacher. Such an environment exacerbates the problem of mismatch. If the cooperating teacher neither believes in, nor enacts the program principles, the student teacher necessarily goes out on a limb when she tries to enact something that is consistent with them. This is especially dangerous with an unsupportive cooperating teacher because there is risk either way; if she fails, she may not only be severely criticized, she may come to believe that such change is not possible, and if she succeeds, she may be seen as threatening and subject to harsh faultfinding anyway.

#### **Reflective Focus**

This issue of compatibility leads us towards our last of the dimensions of the field placement that our study revealed as important for professional growth. The compatibility influences both the focus of a student teacher's reflection and her/his ability to reflect. It also opens up the potential of directed reflection that is an aspect of the reflective potential of the fieldwork situation we will discuss further below. In terms of reflection, we found that the difficult (or less compatible) contexts seemed to co-opt the attention of the credential candidate. The psychic energy devoted to figuring out how to negotiate the setting left little time or energy for the



student teacher to concentrate on the development of her own philosophy and practices. Both Sheila's and Jessica's journal entries during their less compatible assignments were replete with discussions of their struggles. They wrote at length about the negative things witnessed and, though they reflected on those events, their reflections were more concerned with their immediate situations and their relationships with their cooperating teachers, than with their own learning or their future teaching.

In contrast, the journal entries from the strong placements contained multiple instances of reflection on their own developing beliefs and practices. Their focus in these settings was consistently and clearly on their developing ideas about teaching. They grappled with the principles by working to understand them. In certain instances we could even view how they began to integrate them into their own thinking. In the best of these instances, they were also free to apply them to their current work and imagine how they would be part of their future practice. In the weaker placements, their reflections focused on surviving the moment and on understanding their cooperating teacher rather than understanding themselves. In the end, the reflection focus on the cooperating teacher (rather than the practices at hand or their own growth) was less conducive to professional growth of the type we envisioned.

A further aspect of this reflective focus dimension concerns how the student teaching context functions as a place where the programs' other components (the course work and the student teacher supervisors) are able to engage as triggers for the students' reflective work. In particular, we were interested to learn whether the classroom was a place for examining the ideas raised by the coursework as these ideas are potentially enacted in the life of classrooms and schools. We found ample evidence in the data that course readings and discussions that are organized around the principles serve as reflection triggers for our student teachers. On numerous occasions the students' entries refer to how an idea from the literature is evidenced in practice, or how a question a professor has raised is evidenced or absent in the placement as well.

As important to the process of triggering reflection, however, is facilitating it once it has begun. It is clear from both the journal entries and from the post-journal reflections that the primary facilitators of this continued process of reflection are the student teaching supervisors. Through informal conversations, lesson observation debriefings and in their journal responses, the supervisors support the student teachers in their explorations; they encourage, prod, model, and extend. If the trigger hasn't come from elsewhere, they will provide that too.

Because both Jessica and Sheila stress the important role their supervisors played in their ability to reflect, we must include this aspect of the fieldwork component of our program as we outline what we learned from these two student teachers about how to learn to teach from practice teaching in the field. Jessica summed it up this way:

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She helped me to look at even the most difficult, uncomfortable situations as possibly educative. She helped me develop a set of critical tools to find something to learn from bad teaching, bad schools, and seemingly hopeless situations.... Because of her supervision, I feel that I am in a constant state of reflection, with my eye always on the prize of becoming a great teacher.

### **Implications For Practice And Further Study**

Our concerns about the fieldwork portion of our program have been confirmed by the study we have conducted here. We have learned that even students who already have experience, who are well grounded in their disciplines, who are generally reflective, and who have already embraced the goal of social justice have difficulty in discrepant placements. The primary implications for teacher education practice, which entail questions for further study are: (1) the order of placements may matter; weaker placements seem to be even more detrimental in the first semester than in the second; (2) well-designed coursework can serve as a trigger to reflection in both strong and weak placements; (3) supervisors can function as supports to the whole reflective cycle if they are well-versed in and proponents of the program principles; and (4) compatible placements are more conducive to growth so we need to do all we can to find and develop such opportunities.

### **Placement Order**

Jessica had the difficult placement first. In the course of this experience she raised serious questions about the feasibility of teaching according to our program principles, indeed about teaching at all. In the absence of any classroom models of the theories she was learning in her courses, she nearly gave up hope:

I spent a large part of my semester considering leaving the program, thinking that I had made the wrong choice, that teaching wouldn't work for me. Randy and many other colleagues are miserable; I was, too. Even life at Pacific Bell seemed better, more fulfilling and less pessimistic than this. This placement made my coursework extremely difficult for me, because I didn't see anything I was learning in action. This not only made me doubt the validity of what I was learning at Mills, but also made me, as a student, struggle to engage with the subject matter in my classes, because there was no meaningful context for me. There was no way to have a Dewey-esque interaction between my education and my experience.

Sheila, on the other hand, did not engage in such serious doubting. Though she struggled with the situation and experienced a significant setback in her reflective process, she did not sink to such depths. She questioned neither her own decision to go into teaching, nor the value of the program principles. She recognized many problems in the context and sometimes wondered if she could do anything differently while there, but only while there. Even with that, later journal entries indicated that she was beginning to take steps to enact some of the program principles she had already embraced, which may be a key to the difference. She was

much more familiar with the program principles; she had seen positive examples of them in operation and knew that they could work; and she had more firmly incorporated them into her own belief system. It may be that inconsistent placements in the second semester are not as great a problem as they are in the first. This will be a question we will want to investigate further.

#### ***Well-designed Coursework***

The student teachers referred with great frequency to issues, ideas, and questions presented and explored in their Mills classes. The data shared in this article reflect this well; they are representative of all the data we collected from the student teachers we studied. The frequency of references to course work is all the more significant because there is no requirement for the student teachers to do so. They are asked to reflect in their professional journals on their student teaching experiences but without specification as to how. Sometimes a course reading would remind them of something that had happened in their placement and cause them to re-consider that incident in light of this new information. At other times an experience in the classroom would remind them of a previous reading or collegial discussion that would encourage them to explore alternative interpretations and responses. This is, of course, encouraging news; our activities and assignments seem to be supporting the process of recognizing, reflecting upon, enacting, and embracing our program principles. But many questions remain. Are there some assignments and activities that are better than others, and if so, which ones and why? Do they work as well for student teachers who do not have such strong educational or experiential backgrounds and/or who are not already well on their way to understanding and embracing program principles? Many faculty members have engaged in research on such questions. Several examples come from our own work that led us to this current study (LaBoskey, 1997, 1998, 2000; LaBoskey & Cline, 2000; Richert, 1997, 1998, 2000).

#### ***Supervisor Support***

It is absolutely clear from our study that supervisors are vitally important in helping the student teachers learn lessons about the program principles from their fieldwork experiences. Our discussion of this at the end of the findings section of the paper presents some of the reasons why. A question that we have as we consider this finding is how we can build this mentoring or supervisory piece of our program into a more substantial and legitimate piece. While most of our faculty supervise one or two of the student teachers, the majority of supervision of our students is done by part time associates who are not supported particularly well in their learning of the program principles, nor compensated well for their critically important work. A first step for us, then, is to try to rectify these programmatic arrangements. One important part of that rectification needs to include professional development opportunities for the supervisors where they, too, can examine in a parallel manner

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the program principles and how those principles might inform their supervisory work.

There are many questions that emerge from our finding regarding the supervisors as well. We wonder what kind of professional development would be most powerful for supervisors' learning about the principles, for example. Are there supervision strategies that work well in "problematic" settings that might be altered for settings where there is greater correspondence between the program goals and the teaching at the site? Which strategies are most powerful for which situations, how do supervisors best learn those strategies, and how do we determine whether they are successful, when they are successful, and in what ways they are successful?<sup>8</sup>

#### **Compatible Placements**

The final implication of our study is the one idea we had about placement before we began this investigation: we need to find better places for our students to student teach. What we have learned from this work is what a "better" placement ought to include; they need to be safe, nested contexts for learning where the principles are well blended and where there is a reflective focus to the work. With a richer understanding of why difficult placements are difficult, and what learning challenges they present for even the most talented of our student teachers, we are better equipped to search for placements that will serve the principled practice goals that we have. But given the reality of how hard it will be to find a plethora of such placements, we have also concluded that we need to work more closely with our school-based colleagues to create such settings. We have recently been funded to create a Teacher Institute for Urban Fieldwork where we will be working with some of our cooperating teachers and supervisors to enhance the benefits of the fieldwork experience for all constituencies.

As we think back to the opening of this paper and to our concern for creating an integrated program that is consistent throughout, we have become clearer about the consequences of the placement match with program principles. Given what we have learned, we realize even more clearly that teacher education programs should persist in asking how we can work toward creating the circumstances where all of our cooperating teachers in all of our placements teach in ways that embody our program principles. At the same time we need to consider ways of preparing and supporting all student teachers to make the most of more discrepant placements, since, despite our best efforts, that scenario is likely to continue. This study helps to reveal some ways in which we might do so: by having the least compatible placements come later in the student teacher's experience; by having well-designed, well-integrated coursework that supports the learning of program principles; by having supervisors who are well-grounded in program philosophy and adequately supported by the institution; and by working more closely with cooperating teachers so that all might understand and model the program's principles. Only when we accomplish these goals will we be able to claim

that in the fieldwork portion of our programs, we do indeed “practice what we preach.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The responsibility for this paper was shared equally between both authors. Authorship is alphabetical.

<sup>2</sup>All of the names (people and schools) in this paper are pseudonyms with the exception of the names of the Mills College faculty, and Mills College itself.

<sup>3</sup>Currently we are a faculty of five full and six part time people. Six of the eleven returned the survey.

<sup>4</sup>One question that lingers for us is why it is that Randy, a Mills graduate, teaches in a way that appears to Jessica to be so different from what she learned at Mills. This question warrants deep consideration on our part as our study of our students’ learning opportunities continues.

<sup>5</sup>As a laboratory school, the Mills Children’s School classrooms always have more than one student teacher working in them at a time. The “Head Teacher” and the student teachers meet daily for discussion and debriefing before school and during lunch.

<sup>6</sup>She had just read several articles by James Banks in her courses, Curriculum and Instruction in the Elementary School and Introduction to the Profession of Teaching Diverse Learners.

<sup>7</sup>It might be inferred that the difficulties Sheila encountered were due to the fact that she had embraced the program principles and was frustrated and disturbed by their absence in the placement. But she did not discuss that directly in any of her entries.

<sup>8</sup>We did actually begin to examine this in a subsequent study. See Richert, A., LaBoskey, V., and Kroll, L. (2000), “Identifying ‘Good’ Student Teacher Supervision: A Programmatic Perspective.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

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