

THE GOODLAD OCCASIONAL

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By spring 2005, it had become clear to the principals and teachers in the schools that had been providing experiences for future teachers from Northern Lights University that significant changes were pending. Interschool conversations were taking place, and the university's director of teacher education had made himself available to answer questions and engage in meetings when requested. The idea of a cohort of perhaps five or six prospective teachers being assigned to participate in school-wide activities as well as apprentice teach in classrooms proved to be particularly provocative.

A major difficulty in the discussions was that nobody provided guidelines as to how this was to be done. This and other matters were to be worked out cooperatively by school and university personnel in the process increasingly referred to as simultaneous renewal. The director of teacher education said that in all probability most student teachers would be placed singly in classrooms when the upcoming fall quarter began but that proposals from individual schools requesting a cohort group would be given careful consideration. The university director expressed the hope that several schools would aspire to introduce the cohort concept by the time the winter quarter began.

More overwhelming was the idea that becoming a regular partner school with a cohort group of future teachers

required that there be an ongoing internal process of becoming an exemplary educational site, a setting engaged in a continuous process of making long- and short-term plans: carrying on faculty discussion of both problems and innovative ideas, gathering relevant data, planning and taking action subsequent to decisions, and then studying and revising as work progressed. It was not expected that major changes in school policies and practices would be an initial criterion for becoming a partner school. Rather, there would be an initial commitment to renewal involving DDAE: discussion, decision making, action, and evaluation.

A rather sobering research study came in for attention. Several years earlier, researcher Jianping Shen had done a study of some middle schools serving as professional development schools for teacher education in a major university. The school personnel involved were delighted with the designation of being professional development schools, but the idea that they were then faced with the necessity of working steadily toward becoming exemplary places for future teachers to study and practice was commonly not considered to be a responsibility. Presumably, these schools would continue to be professional development schools whether or not they became more and more exemplary.

An informal survey toward the end of the 2004–2005 academic year revealed that most of the schools that, in the past,

had taken future teachers from Northern Lights University into their classrooms indicated that they would not elect to become partner schools for the 2005–2006 school year.

However, the principal of one elementary school said that members of his faculty were quite excited about the idea of having a half dozen or so future teachers who would join them as junior members of the faculty for the fall months. They saw these beginners as strengthening the ability of the school to take care of the learning needs of the students. There would be sufficient problems and opportunities to get the faculty seriously engaged in how best to use such a resource and provide each beginner with the kind of mentoring that these teachers had not received during the course of their own preparation. In effect, they would be engaged in a process of renewing their own teaching as well as inducting newcomers into the responsibilities of teaching the young. Word also was received from the principals of a senior high school, a junior high school, and two elementary schools regarding the probability that they would start the process of becoming partner schools at the beginning of the 2006 winter quarter.

By the beginning of May 2005, the teachers at Emerald Elementary School – the one that had volunteered to begin the process of becoming a partner school in the following fall quarter – found themselves talking more and more about what lay ahead of them. Emerald is a relatively small urban school of only sixteen teachers. Increases in enrollment that had occurred several years before had necessitated the placement on the grounds of a temporary building with

two rather small classrooms. But now enrollment was dropping, and there would be a need for only one room of the duplex. Nobody wanted to teach there. But then Tom Delaney, whose innovative ideas were not always well received by his colleagues, came up with an appealing one. He had begun his teaching only three years before and had talked frequently about his loneliness and frustration with having been the only student teacher in the school where he had apprenticed. He would have liked to have talked with other beginners who were his peers instead of often feeling that the questions he raised with his supervising teacher were an annoyance to her. Tom proposed that they set aside one of the two rooms in the duplex as a kind of home base for the apprentice cohort. They would have a place to talk freely with one another about their problems, ideas, successes, and failures.

Tom had a second idea, however, that was more provocative, largely because of the recent steady decline in enrollments. There had been no way of predicting from year to year the graded structure of each classroom. Nobody wanted to teach two grades, but this was invariably necessary. Tom thought that instead of this “misfortune” interfering with the single grade preference of nearly all of the teachers, they should instead plan deliberately for a multi-graded structure that would more easily accommodate the shifting grade structure of total enrollment. Needless to say, Tom’s unorthodox idea on this matter provoked questions that implied negative reactions to the idea.

Tom was a rather rare bird in teaching. He had wanted to teach a kindergarten class but lost out to teachers

of more seniority and had to settle for the second grade. But what he also proposed to do brought on approval. He volunteered to take over the other room in the duplex on condition that he would have a choice of someone from the incoming cohort of newcomers in the fall who would devote most of his or her teaching time to this classroom. And he wanted this to be a three-grade classroom made up of kindergarten, first grade, and second grade pupils. Tom hit the jackpot on this idea because there was now the possibility that at least some of the teachers at these levels would no longer have to settle for a two-grade classroom. The overflow, up to the normal class load, at each level would go to Tom.

Tom had no master plan in mind for his proposed innovations, and he certainly did not predict the consequences of what followed. Clearly, he changed the status of student teachers and opened up the possibility that there would in the future be much more of a collegueship

among them and those experienced teachers who formerly were more supervisors than colleagues. And, certainly, Tom's venture into a multi-graded classroom was both intriguing and threatening. There would be much to talk about when the 2005–2006 school year began. Would Tom's class become the funny farm to be nervously regarded by his colleagues, or would it tempt some of them to break out of the deep structure of the graded classroom?

(to be continued)

John I. Goodlad
Institute for Educational Inquiry
124 East Edgar Street
Seattle, WA 98102
(206) 325-3010