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When questions guide the work: Voices of passionate teachers

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When questions guide the work: Voices of passionate teachers

Cover Page Footnote
We would like to acknowledge and celebrate the continued hard work of all the educators we have worked with throughout the years - students, colleagues, and friends. We learned a lot from you that helped us write this article. We would especially like to thank our students who shared their stories and reflections with us as part of this study. Good teaching is good teaching and you are good teachers - your students are enriched by your teaching and dedication to your profession and we are grateful to you for sharing your insights.
When Questions Guide the Work: Voices from Passionate Teachers

Abstract:
This study describes what the graduates of a teacher educator program continue to apply in their classrooms and schools up to fifteen years after they began teaching. The data for this study included focus group notes, interview notes, and questionnaire responses. Teacher educators analyzed the data in order to explore their inquiry about how the educator preparation program had impacted and continued to impact graduates. The voices of the graduates highlighted ways they continued to apply foundational ideas from the program in their classrooms.

Introduction
Teacher educator programs routinely assess the impact of the program on teaching candidates through course assessments and teaching observations. In addition, teacher education programs also routinely conduct surveys in order to determine the impact of the program on its graduates. Few programs have attempted to determine whether they can assess the influence of their program on its graduates as many as fifteen years after graduation.

The teacher educators who wrote this article have intentionally embedded practitioner research into their professional lives and are committed to helping bring forth the teacher voice in order to inform their practice as teacher educators. They agree with Dana (2016) that the actual work of teachers is “wonderfully messy” and that teachers need practice-based evidence to balance educational research done at universities by university faculty with the real world they experience daily in schools (p. 2). For the purpose of this article, “practice-based evidence” was the words of teachers working daily in secondary schools. These teachers participated in individual interviews, took part in focus group interviews, and shared written reflections about how the program continues to influence their work.

The formal research for this study about graduates of a Master of Arts in Teaching educator preparation program took place over a three-year period. However, through the process of interviewing graduates, analyzing data, and discussing the data, it became clear that the foundation for this study was laid many years ago with questions from the teacher educators themselves. Their habit of asking reflective questions grounded in practice (such as “What is good teaching, and how do I know my students are learning?”) was based on the work of Schön (1983) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) but articulated more recently by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014). As secondary teachers and secondary administrators,
these teacher educators were already focused on studying the impact of their own practice, applying Schön’s description of reflection-on-action to themselves (Schön, 1983). One teacher educator remembers being part of a school administrative team that taught teachers how to engage in collaborative inquiry while the other teacher educator remembers engaging in action research in a middle school classroom around the question of the effectiveness of authentic assessment. In both cases, they were focused on growing as professionals by asking practice-based questions and reflecting on the data the questions generated (Sagor, 2000).

This study was grounded in the idea that knowledge about teaching is created by teachers engaging in inquiry both about current knowledge and what is happening in their own classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The teacher educators who wrote this article wanted to intentionally investigate their own program but examine data from graduates rather than teaching candidates. They had heard anecdotally from school administrators that their graduates continued to be successful in their secondary school classrooms. They were curious about what could be learned about the influence of this program by listening to the voices of graduates and wondered if it was possible to understand the influences when potential other factors such as their own continuing professional development or length of time in their schools might mitigate the findings. See Appendix A for a list of these other factors in the form of questions.

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of a teacher preparation program situated in a small liberal arts college on its graduates and consider the implications for teacher educators. Questions of interest to the teacher educators included: “Did we awaken the teacher within, as described by the program’s Domain Five? Are our graduates continuing to explore what it means to be a good teacher? How will we know our graduates have internalized the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will truly awaken the teacher within?” Multiple times throughout the year, more questions drove the ongoing process of reflection, but always for the purpose of exploring an important question that was posed at the beginning of the program: “What does it mean to be a good teacher?” This study was a natural extension of this ongoing inquiry.

**Literature Review**

The questions from this study are grounded in the core texts used by the program. Teachers must understand themselves (Palmer, 2004) and relate to their students as individuals (Palmer, 2017). When teachers work with students, they must demonstrate their belief that all students can learn (Fried, 2001) and create
engaging curricula that invites students into a study of the core ideas in a discipline (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Teachers, including teacher educators, should be engaged in inquiry about teaching and learning in the context of their own classrooms (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Sagor, 2000). The result of the ongoing inquiry is the creation of craft knowledge, knowledge that is specific to the profession and generated from the intentional examination of teaching practice (Barth, 2001; Burney, 2004; Wisehart, 2008). Teachers should continue to engage in inquiry about teaching throughout their careers (Fullan, 2007; Wisehart, 2005). In a recent study of other teacher educators, Clayton and Kilbane (2020) suggested that teacher inquiry can be even more powerful when teachers create a classroom culture that encourages inquiry of their students as well.

An important part of this Master of Arts in Teaching program has been the focus on modeling, coaching, and ongoing reflection as a crucial part of being a teacher (Berghoff et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006; McEntee & Hole, 2003; Schön, 1983). All teaching candidates must develop and implement action research in their classrooms as a graduation requirement (Sagor, 2000).

Program Overview

The program upon which this study is based was created as the educator preparation program for a small Midwestern college. The founders of the program and early faculty members considered working with this program as an opportunity to create something totally new, a teacher preparation program that was not constrained by any existing structures. Faculty members intentionally created a program that blended theory and practice, embedded learning from books within practicum experiences, emphasized engaging in action research in a teaching context, infused Quaker principles, and helped candidates deepen their understanding of what they read in the context of summer, fall, and spring practicum experiences over nine months.

During the first semester, faculty model dispositions and skills that they will explicitly teach throughout the year (Fried, 2001; Palmer, 2017; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Instructors help candidates build positive relationships with each other and during a summer practicum, help candidates build positive relationships with students who collaborate in groups to create interdisciplinary projects. Candidates deepen their understanding of students during the fall semester by working with their mentor teacher throughout the entire semester. Modeling continues this semester primarily by a mentor teacher but also by faculty during fall
coursework. Then during the spring, candidates put into practice what they have learned during their full-time student teaching and implement an action research project in their classrooms.

A distinctive element of this teacher preparation program is Domain Five, a unique addition to Danielson’s four domains (Danielson, 2014) as the foundation of the assessment system for this program. Domain Five reflects Quaker principles that have been woven throughout the entire program and provides descriptors for awakening the teacher within (M.A.T., n.d.). Specifically, Domain Five includes a focus on:

- being a lifelong learner,
- building community,
- advocating for equity,
- recognizing positives in all human beings, and
- applying inclusive practices such as consensus building and conflict resolution.

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of this Master of Arts in Teaching program on graduates from the perspective of the graduates. In order to gather varied perspectives and have the widest engagement, the teacher educators decided to use a qualitative case study approach with open-ended questions delivered in a variety of modes. It was determined that this open-ended response format would elicit the best chance of participation and gather the types of responses most aligned with understanding the influence of a program on its graduates.

The work on this qualitative case study began with the invitation to graduates to participate in the case study either through a survey, interview, or focus groups. Graduates of the program were invited through email to participate in the study and to select the format most convenient for them. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to 80 graduates of the program who had been teaching at least two years. Forty-three graduates, teaching from 2-15 years, responded that they were willing to participate in the study. Using the graduates’ selected mode, the teacher educators began administering the components of the study. Surveys were sent, interviews were conducted by the teacher educators individually, and focus groups were held in the summers on the program’s campus. The teacher educators met frequently to discuss their role as interviewers and to assure consistency and reliability in the process.
The data gathered by the teacher educators for this study were from three main sources: a survey, interviews, and focus groups. Questions for all the sources were aligned with programmatic outcomes and with the Quaker Domain 5 aspects. Questions were posed to elicit both short answer responses and to gather more reflective and open-ended responses. Each iteration used the same questions and format. The data collected included descriptions, reflections, and information about the graduates’ learning as a teacher and their perspective of the program’s influence on them. See Appendix B for a list of questions used in this study.

Analysis

Analysis of the data gathered from the 43 graduates was done by the teacher educators, using the graduate responses from all data points—surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Data was first read for content and narrative analysis, then the teacher educators moved to a coding process looking for aligned themes, words, and ideas. As the teacher educators read and reread the data, three interconnected themes emerged: Relationships, Reflection, and Domain 5/Quaker Principles. Early data gathered suggested the following themes:

1. Relationships: 32 of the 43 participants explicitly noted the importance of relationships with students in various ways.
2. Reflection: 16 of 43 explicitly noted the importance of reflection although all 43 were engaging in reflection.
3. Domain 5/Quaker Principles: 21 of 43 participants explicitly noted different aspects of Domain Five while 32 of 43 made either an explicit reference to Domain Five or mentioned an element of Domain Five as continuing to be important.

However, as the teacher educators continued to examine the data, a rich complexity was discovered in the stories and extensive anecdotes that described how individual graduates had applied core ideas from this graduate program. The narrative examples were so rich with information and with the voices of the graduates that the decision was made by the teacher educators to focus on these stories and anecdotes. The teacher educators examined the responses, stories, and anecdotes from the interview data in order to draw meaning from them. This iterative process helped the teacher educators distinguish six interconnected themes from the original three: (1) Relationships and Community; (2) Relationships and Academics; (3) Reflection; (4) Quaker Principles Internalized and Embedded; (5) Focus on the Whole Person; (6) Equity and Social Justice.
Findings

A clear decision was then made to write this article in such a way as to allow the voices of the teachers to describe the continuing influence of the program on its graduates. While authentic stories, narratives, and names were used in the collection, pseudonyms were used in the writing of the article. The following sections represent the voices of our graduates describing the influence of the program on their ongoing inquiry into what it means to be a good teacher.

Theme One: Relationships and Community

When the graduates talked about relationships, responses fell into two overlapping categories of:

- Intentionally nurturing relationships with all students, especially students who were not always successful in school and
- Intentionally developing relationships in the context of supporting a student-centered learning environment.

Graduates used different strategies to intentionally foster positive relationships with their students. Several graduates described how they built community by using formal structures that allowed students to share and build relationships with each other by sharing about their personal lives. Karen from cohort 15 and Megan from cohort 11 described in detail how that worked in their classrooms. Several other graduates shared examples that showed how they built relationships more informally but still focused on building relationships with a focus on helping students grow as individuals.

Karen wrote about Crew, a structure in her school that helped students focus on community. She clearly saw the time her students spent in their Crews as time to develop skills such as respecting each other and handling diverse opinions in the context of supporting a sense of community in the entire school. Karen, cohort 15, said in a survey response:

Some students had different opinions than others, but we created space for everyone to participate, even if there were disagreements. I always participate in the circle, sharing my opinion with others as well, so they can see a role model. Through Crew, students learn how to respect one another, even with differing opinions.
Karen noted that teachers “created space for everyone” which highlighted the importance of intentionally including all students. She made it clear that she used this structure to explicitly teach students how “to learn to respect one another.” She also echoed a theme from other respondents when she noted that this classroom structure helped the culture of respect to be part of the entire school and not just her class.

Megan cohort 11, established the routine of students meeting in what she called a family group each Monday. Students met in the same group each week in order to develop a trust and respect that allowed them to share personal stories from the weekend that helped them make a transition from what was often a tumultuous weekend into a week focused on learning. Students were invited to share in the large group after family time on a volunteer basis. Megan also specifically noted the influence family time had in a large high school in which bullying and fighting was common. “I had very few instances of bullying/fighting/etc. within cohort members in class, and I think family time helped with that.”

Allison, cohort 9, also shared in a survey response that when she thought about her relationships with her students, she thought about more than just academic performance. “This program challenged me to think about things in different ways than my colleagues…I now think about my students as the whole child…The program helped me turn that into a personal strength—relationship building.” Allison shared that she routinely asked her students to write in a reflection journal at the end of the day. “I have them write in their reflection journal something you are proud of and something you are frustrated with. I do that as well. A new reflection journal every year.”

The preceding examples described how some graduates thought about the need for students to feel valued and respected as individuals before they could focus on academic instruction. Although some graduates wrote about more informal ways to build positive relationships with and among their students, there was widespread agreement about the importance of relationships in the classroom environment, including the importance of learning with students.

**Theme Two: Relationships and Academics**

Graduates reported different ways of building positive relationships in the context of academics and learning. They described explicit connections between developing relationships and learning. Megan adapted ideas from the book *The Freedom Writers*. Melissa shared an anecdote about her relationship with an individual student over the course of a school year, while Karen wrote more
generally about the importance of high expectations as a basis for positive relationships. Lynn described her relationships in the context of classroom discussions and John described the way he helped his middle school team improve relationships with an individual student.

Megan, cohort 11, wrote about the importance of building authentic positive relationships with her students as the pathway to an academic project. She was teaching a unit that included the book *The Freedom Writers* by Erin Gruwell. She assigned her students the task of writing their own stories, similar to those in *The Freedom Writers*, in journal form that she would collect and share in a published form with students and adults. After noting the suspicion of her students, she reported that once they began writing, the students wanted adults who work with teenagers to read their stories:

I pride myself in getting to know my students, knowing their backstories. But, wow, I was blown away. I had no idea about the profound sadness or betrayal some of them had experienced. I feel very proud that they trusted me enough to tell me the stories they really wanted to tell and not choose something they thought would be more tame (Wisehart, 2018).

This is one example of many that highlighted how intentionally graduates of this program listened to their students as part of establishing a culture of respect and trust.

Melissa, cohort 14, shared in a survey a story of an individual student that highlighted how refusing to give up on a student can be a part of a relationship that, in time, supports academic achievement, even if incrementally. She writes of a student who despite her efforts to build a positive relationship, would not engage academically. During a second semester with him, Melissa showed how she had internalized another important principle from this program, the process of monitoring, reflecting, and adjusting. “I suddenly realized I didn't really know a student I taught for an entire semester.” Melissa described how she did not give up on Adam but kept working on getting to know him as a person and as a learner:

It was in our literature circle unit that Adam really showed what kind of a student he was. I assumed he’d pick the sci-fi option, and he again surprised me by choosing a story of two women connected by fate and tragedy in Afghanistan. When he reached a particularly sad and emotional moment in the book, he threw it on the ground, and I almost cried--not tears of frustration for his manhandling of school property, but tears of joy at his investment in this story…Every day for the rest of the year, Adam talked to
me about something—a book, a trip his uncle was going on. With the help of a few good stories, we’d finally connected.

Melissa’s final reflection was filled with insights:

From my experience with Adam, I take away multiple things. It reaffirmed the power of relationships. It reaffirmed the power of the right story at the right time. But my biggest reminder is this: when I focus on small changes—things I have control over—the results can be just as affirming as a battle to fight something essentially out of my control.

Melissa’s reflection included several priorities explicitly taught by faculty during the program—the importance of building positive relationships with her students, the importance of reflection, the reminders to focus on what is within your control, the need to constantly monitor and adjust. Melissa clearly kept her focus on what she could control rather than blame outside factors. Then she continued to monitor, reflect, and adjust, leading her to improve a relationship that helped a student grow.

Writing in a survey about her experience in a high poverty school, Molly, cohort 3, talked about the importance of balancing high expectations with promoting student voice in her classroom:

As a teacher, I found success in allowing students to have an open dialogue about content, refusing to lecture to them throughout the class and challenging them to tackle tough assignments with peer support. My passing and attendance rates were always high. And not because I had honors students. When you really listen to students you can build a relationship that fosters success.

Molly was one of several graduates who spoke about relationships in the context of helping students meet high expectations. As the excerpt above shows, she balanced giving students the freedom to express their own thoughts with a commitment to holding them accountable for high standards. She also notes the importance of peer support as part of her classroom, a theme other graduates spoke to as well.

Lynn, cohort 1, talked in a phone interview about the importance of seeing teaching as “an act of hospitality toward the young” and “creating a sense of home in the classroom” which gives some context for her desire to build positive relationships with her students. However, Lynn emphasized that building relationships with her students was for the purpose of helping students meet
rigorous academic expectations. Lynn noted that her high expectations are grounded in principles based on the work of Parker Palmer (2017).

Lynn further explained that accountability for learning is embedded in her classroom community. Putting into place what the program emphasizes within a literacy course, she explains how she has taught her students how to hold each other accountable for meeting the goals of the discussion, not solely as individuals but as a group:

The success of a discussion is dictated by the degree to which the class as whole deepens their understanding and confirms the understanding of those in the room. And in the best of classes, there comes a moment when a student looks around the room and invites someone who has not yet spoken to speak or a student who has perhaps in other discussions dominated stays quiet for a long time and finally is able to synthesize the threads of his or her classmates into a conclusion that honors what has come before.

Lynn supplied one of the most extensive descriptions of a classroom in response to the question asking how the program had influenced her teaching. She described a blend of trying to make the classroom comfortable and welcoming while also insisting on rigor in academic work. She explicitly grounded her responses in the core writings from the program even though she had been teaching for fifteen years.

Some graduates thought beyond their own classrooms and described how they encouraged colleagues to build positive relationships with their students. Collaborating with colleagues is emphasized in the program during the year-long teaching practicum. John, cohort 1, described for a focus group one such attempt to support his colleagues:

Two minutes. That’s all I asked of them. Two minutes of their time—every day. I work in a middle school as a special education teacher and one of the teams that I worked with was struggling with a particular student.

So, I asked the members of the team to give this young man two minutes of their undivided attention every day. They were free to discuss anything. The only goal was to make a connection with their student—a difficult student—but their student nonetheless.

Over the course of the next few weeks, it quickly became apparent during team meetings that the teachers who had invested two minutes of
their time were reaping the benefits of their efforts. They noticed an increase in classroom participation and overall effort. Things were not perfect, but they were improved. The teachers who had made no effort to make a connection with the young man, saw no improvement.

There was another important change that took place, but it was not with the student. It was with the teachers. The teachers that gave two minutes of their time began to see the young man as more than just someone who sat in their classroom and did next to nothing.

The young man finished the fourth quarter of his 7th grade year, and it was his best quarter of the school year. Teachers had a different perspective of one young man, and the student had a different perspective on teachers and learning.

This extended example highlights the extent to which a graduate advocated for a student in the face of resistance from some of his colleagues. This shows a graduate acting on one of the Quaker principles embedded in the program—challenging negative attitudes and actively advocating for equity.

Graduates internalized some of the important principles of the program embedded in their evaluation framework (Danielson, 2014) their Domain Five (M.A.T., n.d.), and the literature upon which the program was based (Palmer, 2017; Sagor, 2000). Danielson (2014) emphasizes the importance of teachers working with colleagues. The program’s Domain Five and Palmer (2017) both emphasize the importance of working with others in order to make a difference in the lives of students. Sagor (2000) shares a model for posing questions and collecting data in schools in order to make a positive difference in the lives of students. Ideas from all of these sources are threaded throughout the entire program intentionally in order to make it more likely that teaching candidates internalize the important ideas from each resource.

The excerpts from the two sections related to relationships show how the program’s principles influenced graduates from a range of cohorts over fifteen years. The words of these graduates show a complex understanding of how they were applying their understanding of the importance of relationships in classroom and school settings. They were intentional about building relationships. They showed trust in their students and a belief that all students are worthy of being in a relationship with the teacher and with each other. They showed how they could establish structures to formalize the building of relationships. They showed how
relationships could be built within the context of academic instruction or separate from instruction.

Theme Three: Reflection

Candidates in this study emphasized the importance of reflection, in some ways similar to the findings of other studies of this program (Berghoff et al., 2011; Rickey & Wisehart, 2014). Some graduates spoke to the way the program helped them internalize reflection so that it was automatic. Other graduates affirmed the role of reflection to help them remain true to their values and help them improve their teaching. Still other graduates wrote about how important it was to include reflection as part of their classroom practice with students so that their students also used reflection to improve their own learning.

Tracy, cohort 15, said in a focus group that the thing she most appreciated about the program was the emphasis on reflection. “The M.A.T. taught me to ask for me and for my students ‘How is this working?’ We spent a lot of time reflecting during the M.A.T. This has become an essential practice every day… Reflection helps me think about how I can improve. It gave me the tools to think about how to improve.”

Lynn, cohort 1, reported in a survey that she continued to get better at reflection, but also acknowledged that using reflection to improve teaching is not easy:

The longer I teach, the more I reflect, the better skilled by some measures I become, the more I can see what we should be doing. Yet often I feel like I am standing on one side of a rather large canyon. I can see the issue, and even a possible solution on the other side, but there is no way to cross. I can only wave and hope.

But Lynn is also clear about the importance of one of the core texts of the program, The Courage to Teach, to support her in her reflection and help her remain committed to teaching.

Some graduates noted that they were intentional about reflection. Michael, cohort 3, noted in a phone interview that he:

...tried to make good notes about what I did and needed to do differently. I do that formally. I do talk to co-workers, reflect, share…We already talk about what we should do next year and make plans to meet this summer to
work. It is a choice to reflect. I want to improve my practice. I care to do that, to reflect.

Susan, cohort 11, was one of many who explicitly stated in a survey that she had continued to engage in reflection years after graduating from the program. She asserted that:

…the encouraged and mandatory reflection aspect of student teaching has stayed with me and helped me be a better teacher. A practical implementation of reflection is that I have found at the end of a lesson I write a note to myself on my lesson plan about what need to be changed (timing, scaffolding, problems, etc.) for next year when I teach the same lesson.

Beth, cohort 10, also noted in a survey the importance of reflection during the program and its influence, “Everything was modeled. Reflection. That’s the big difference between myself and other teachers. The program taught me 110% to reflect continually.”

Graduates referred often to how they had internalized the practice of reflection as a natural part of their growth as teachers. Some graduates were intentional about when and where to do reflection while others noted that they seemed to reflect continuously. Some reflected mostly about student learning while others reflected about their own performance as teachers. But throughout, all graduates demonstrated a firm commitment to continue making reflection part of their professional lives.

Theme Four: Quaker Principles Internalized and Embedded

A wide range of graduates from the past fifteen years noted the significance of the program’s Domain Five in their lives as teachers. Several of them spoke about other themes (relationships and reflection) in the context of Domain Five (being a lifelong learner, building community, advocating for equity, recognizing positives in all human beings, applying inclusive practices such as consensus building and conflict resolution) while others explicitly described the importance of Domain Five to their ongoing development as teachers.

The participants were not asked to check off specific elements of Quaker principles they still apply in their current teaching. Rather, they were asked to respond broadly to how they were still applying core ideas from the program, including Domain Five. Their responses were analyzed to see if any of the program
standards from Domain Five grounded in Quaker principles were evident in the way they talked about their teaching.

It was sometimes difficult for graduates to articulate specifically how the program’s Domain Five continued to influence their teaching. They suggested that this was because elements of Domain Five became so engrained in their teaching that the elements became part of who they are. Elizabeth, cohort 9, shared explicitly during a focus group. “I put Quaker principles into my teaching every day. I forget they were on paper. It becomes who you are.” She said that putting principles from Domain Five into practice was “…like driving a car. You forget all the things you learned, turn signal, brake, and you do it all automatically.” Elizabeth articulated what many other graduates said or implied about the principles of Domain Five being automatic. She generalized these principles and said, “It’s what good teachers do.” She also reinforced what others said about how her understanding of Domain Five led her to think beyond her own classroom. “Being in the program helped me vocalize to those in power what needs to be changed.” Paul, cohort 8, also expressed in a focus group how deeply engrained the principles of the program are in graduates. “When you live this, it is like breathing.” Allison, cohort 9, said about Domain Five in a focus group that “It’s something that is just part of who I am now.”

Lynn, cohort 1, explicitly credited *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer, 2017) as an ongoing inspiration for her teaching in a survey:

Over the years—15 of them—I’ve returned to Palmer more than any other text as touchstone for reflection, for recommitment to my core values as a teacher, and for wisdom to help me navigate the challenges that years in the classroom and public schools will inevitably bring.

Lynn noted in a previous section an explicit link from the work of Palmer (2017) to her instruction. She was clear that her instruction and her relationships with her students were very firmly grounded in the program’s Domain Five and the work of Palmer.

**Theme Five: Focus on the Whole Person**

Paul, cohort 8, shared in a focus group how his implementation of the principles of the program helped him empower his students. “I ask my students to reflect all the time...My kids are still kids, but they feel like our relationship is so valued that they don’t ‘throw it away.’ We talk about values, perseverance. We build the social piece before we do the academics.”
Eric, cohort 8, shared in a phone interview a view similar to those already described about building relationships that focus on the whole person:

Domain Five is what holistic teaching is all about. True educators know that facts are great but we are in the business of helping develop young people who can survive and thrive in this crazy world. We want them to be mindful free thinkers that challenge social norms for the betterment of their world, their communities, and others…We have to respect them (students) enough to change things and give them a passion for education so they can take it and go–thrive!

Megan, cohort 11, described family time in her classroom in a way that suggested she was also thinking about the program’s Domain Five standards of helping students understand the worth of each human being. “Everyone had an individual conversation with everyone else at some point in the year. When you have face-to-face conversations with people, it really humanizes them to you—or at least that’s the case with teenagers. I also feel like it helped build the environment that I wanted: personable, social, and positive.”

Betsy, cohort 12, reported in a focus group that Earlham M.A.T. principles “matched who I am as a person.” She said that she understands Domain Five to be based on seeking, engaging diverse learners, and treating everyone as individuals but with respect and in community. She shared one of the clearest examples of a graduate acting on her beliefs about Domain Five and Quaker principles in a public-school setting. She received permission to design and implement a new elective course to help students understand alternatives to violence. Betsy shared class norms posted in her room that included:

- Look for and affirm each other’s good ideas.
- Refrain from put downs.
- Listen to understand not to respond.
- Speak up when you haven’t spoken; remain silent when you have spoken often.
- Everyone has the right to pass.

Betsy explained that she gave her students responsibility for keeping track of these norms. She described how she explicitly deferred to the class to decide when it was time to conclude an activity or when to adapt the agenda. Betsy’s description of her program showed how Domain Five principles were implemented in a secondary school classroom with special attention to building community, advocating for
equity and applying inclusive practices such as consensus building and conflict resolution. This interview was one of the most explicit examples of how graduates were putting into practice principles from Domain Five of the program, but it was not the only one.

**Theme Six: Equity and Social Justice**

A number of graduates expressed how they continued to apply Domain Five principles related to equity and social justice. Allison, cohort 9, talked more specifically about Domain Five principles in a survey response:

I try to come up with solutions to conflict, peaceful resolution. I listen to the inner voice in terms of modifying lesson or just reaching out to a student in need. I see my students as people. I call them my scholars and I treat them with respect. I have taught my kids from year to year that fair doesn’t always mean equal and that I have their best interest at heart. I know that relationship building has always been a strength of mine which leads to the trust and mutual respect necessary for a classroom to feel like a community.

Eric, cohort 8, was very clear in a survey response about his passion for advocating for all students. “And really the word ‘fair’ isn’t the right one anymore. We need to use the word equity. In my position I tell them I am the voice for those that don’t have a voice…How can I help and what do they need?” Eric also wrote about how he had internalized a commitment to peace and justice. “I have to listen to what others have to say, their perspective. I have to listen. We get to peace through listening…when we include kids in the process, we are trying to build this peace and justice in the school.”

Tracy, cohort 15, also wrote in a survey response about implementing Domain Five principles when saying she tried “practicing an attitude that shows equality, of treating all students equally.” She also spoke of using reflection as a way to empower students. “The M.A.T. taught me to ask for me and for my students ‘How is this working?’ We spent a lot of time reflecting during the M.A.T. This has become an essential practice every day.”

Michael, cohort 3, reflected in a phone interview on how the M.A.T. program had prepared him to be a teacher. He said the “…biggest was/is the holistic idea of being able to foster change in your students–moral education, social justice–you are educating a student.” He noted that “I accommodate them through my planning rather than them accommodating me” showing the extent to which he has
internalized the Domain 5 emphasis on teaching the whole student. Michael also responded to how he had thought about the Domain 5 focus on community:

In the first few years I have made a choice to practice full integrity, to practice what I preach. Respect for persons is the cornerstone. I always have a set of classroom rules but I tell my students ‘If you need to break these rules, let me know and I will work with you on those. But that needs to go both ways and you are respecting me by telling me what issues are before you break these. Then I can help you with those issues.

Michael also noted that “I start with two days of community building, just to get the ball rolling. It is science, and we have to learn to work together.”

Graduates wrote about how they built classroom communities that included the voices of all students in various ways. Some wrote about how they blended a commitment to making the classroom hospitable while demanding academic rigor. Teaching candidates find Domain Five to be challenging during their clinical practice. Nevertheless, these reflections and anecdotes show that graduates of this program are indeed implementing what they have learned about Domain Five. Some of the most challenging ideas (building community, advocating for equity, building consensus and conflict resolution) as well as becoming lifelong learners and recognizing positives in all human beings are clearly described in the words of graduates.

Lessons Learned

While this study began as a way to help us think about the influence of a program on its graduates many years later, we also discovered the ways our graduates are influencing their own students. From their responses, we have gathered these lessons learned for teachers and teacher educators:

1. Graduates continued to explore what it meant to be a good teacher. For some that meant establishing structures that helped them know students as individuals, for some it meant persisting with individual students, for some it meant a focus on student ownership of class discussions, for others it meant challenging colleagues to meet the needs of students. The ways they continued to explore what it means to be a good teacher were as varied as the graduates themselves.

2. Modeling and embedding reflection in this program helped teaching candidates continue the practice of reflection. Graduate after graduate described how they had embedded reflection into their practice, some of
them in prescribed ways after a lesson or as part of an activity with students. Other graduates described reflection more as an ongoing part of being a professional educator.

3. The focus on relationships throughout the program continued into the teachers’ careers, at times, as much as fifteen years later as noted by the graduates.

4. Domain Five translated to secondary school settings. Some elements of Domain Five, such as valuing all human beings and intentionally building a classroom community, were present in nearly all responses while some of the more challenging elements, such as consensus building and conflict resolution, were described by only some graduates.

5. Graduates continued to grow and learn based on their own inquiry grounded in the core elements of the Master of Arts in Teaching program. Graduates were clear that they knew they were not merely copying what they were taught during the program. Rather they demonstrated that they understood they had to continually grow and adapt based on their own diverse contexts.

6. The voices of the graduates suggested that they had internalized foundational ideas of this program in such a way that they became habits, part of who they were and how they thought about teaching.

**Implications for Teacher Educators**

1. Listen to your teaching candidates and explicitly teach them how to listen to their students. Teaching candidates from this program were often advised: “When in doubt, ask your students.” This suggestion can be embedded in work with teacher candidates to encourage them to find ways to involve their own students in ongoing assessment of learning in their classrooms.

2. Show teacher candidates how to build structures to nurture positive relationships with students as part of the process of learning. Encourage teacher candidates to explore how the intentional building of positive relationships can support a classroom focus on the gradual release of responsibility.

3. Model for candidates how to embrace inquiry as a crucial part of their professional lives. Don’t try to get to a solution too quickly; ask layers of questions that lead to deeper understanding. Continue to inquire about what it means to be a good teacher and understand listening to students as a key part of the inquiry. Explicitly engage teaching candidates in inquiry throughout the program. A focus on questions rather than answers can be key to helping teaching candidates internalize the importance of inquiry in their professional lives.
4. Explicitly teach teacher candidates how to engage in formal and informal action research around key questions such as: “How do I know my students are learning?” Just as these teacher educators learned from their students/graduates, so can all teachers learn from each other.

5. Model how to make practices of good teaching become the habit of good teaching. Reflect with teaching candidates about how to make building relationships, reflection, and collaboration part of their everyday work. Review which foundational aspects of good teaching are becoming habits to them, deeply ingrained so that they are becoming a part of who they are and how they think. Make good teaching habit-forming.

**Final Thoughts**

The graduates of this program were asked explicitly to reflect on the influence of the program on their current practice. Their descriptions revealed not just practices of good teaching and inquiry but how the practices had become habits, deeply ingrained into their practice. Their words throughout this study were words they chose to describe how the program continued to influence who they are as teachers. The words teachers use to describe their teaching are important. Listening to and learning from the voices of teachers who engage in inquiry can help all of us understand more fully what it means to be a good teacher.
Appendix A

It is fair to ask whether an analysis of the descriptions and reflections of graduates years after they left a program can help assess the influence of the program on its graduates. The teacher educators regard these questions as crucial in helping to determine the long-term influence of teacher educator programs on candidates.

- What factors after graduation contributed to who these teachers are today?
- Did the recruiting process make it more likely that these graduates were already likely to grow into the kinds of teachers they have become?
- Have their experiences and their ongoing professional learning been more of a factor in their development than the educator preparation program?
- Can a teacher totally understand all the factors that influence the quality of their teaching?
Appendix B

Questions used for data gathering included the following:

- In what ways are you applying ideas you learned in the M.A.T. program in your work as a teacher?
- Are there specific ideas from *The Passionate Teacher* that you apply to your teaching?
- Are there specific ideas from *The Courage to Teach* that you apply to your teaching?
- What are the most significant obstacles to being a “passionate teacher” currently?
- How are you dealing with such obstacles? How are Earlham Principles and Practices, as exemplified in the Earlham M.A.T. Domain 5, influencing your work as a teacher?
- Which element of Earlham Principles and Practices is most present in your work with students?
Appendix C

The program used the four domains from Charlotte Danielson (2014) in addition to their own Domain Five to help them frame their ongoing inquiry about good teaching.

- Domain 1: Planning and Preparation
- Domain 2: Environment
- Domain 3: Instruction
- Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities

The program added the following Domain 5 to the assessment structure in order to focus teaching candidates on program goals specific to Principles and Practices of the institution. The questions following each component are self-assessment questions from the Program’s Portfolio Handbook.

Domain 5: Awakening the Teacher Within

Component 5a: Being a Lifelong Learner
- Do I demonstrate intrinsic motivation and sustained inquiry?
- Do I routinely relate core readings from the M.Ed. and/or other professional reading to my practice either explicitly, implicitly, or both?

Component 5b: Cooperative Community of Learners
- Do I demonstrate active listening and thoughtful reflection?
- Do I use understanding of differences and diversity as a basis for knowing and accepting all learners?
- Do I help my learning audience understand the value of working with a diverse group?

Component 5c: Being Open to New Truth and Applying What is Known to Improving the World
- Do I probe assumptions and values in my perspectives and analyses, in various readings, and in discussions?
- Do I know how to identify a need in my context, pose inquiry questions, collect and analyze data and take action based on emerging understandings?

Component 5d: Incorporating Quaker Principles
- Do I help learners build on positives paying special attention to disenfranchised students?
- Do I actively advocate for equity and do I try various ways to challenge negative attitudes, prejudice, or practices to ensure that all learners,
particularly those traditionally underserved, receive a fair opportunity to succeed?

- Do I apply consensus building as a way to be inclusive to all?
- Do I help others resolve conflicts based on an understanding of the worth of each human being?
References


