

**Win, Win, Win – A Successful School and University Collaboration
in Developing a Community of Learners**

**Dr. Rick Bell
Mrs. Diane Marshall
Mr. Chris Vandaele**

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Introduction

One of the significant differentiating features of the University of Victoria is its commitment to community involvement through experiential learning (University of Victoria, 2007). For over a decade, a collaborative relationship has developed between an elementary school in a large, urban school district and the Faculty of Education Elementary Teacher Education Program. Initially, the principal of this elementary school was approached by a faculty member to investigate whether there was a shared interest in examining a different way to deliver a university-based physical education curriculum and instruction course. This alternative delivery model would involve teaching a portion of the course in the elementary school. This year long physical education course is required for all third year elementary preservice teachers. Although this is a third year course in the teacher education program, it is the first year for these students to be in the Faculty of Education.

This school-based model for teaching courses in teacher education programs is not a new phenomenon in physical education. Research has supported this model for over two decades (Darling-Hamond, 1994; Zeichner, 1985; Clarke & Hubball, 2001). This manner of delivering university courses in which preservice teachers obtain relevant school experience is simply applying what is already known about the relative importance of the field experience component in teacher education (Ribden, 1996; Zeichner, 1985). In preparing physical education teachers, school-based teacher education courses are creating stronger and more positive university-school experiences (Clarke & Hubball, 2001; Rovegno, 1992a). From a broader perspective, developing better university-school relationships are critical if we want to build effective communities of teacher-learners at all levels (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Titone, Sherman, & Palmer, 1998). Of critical importance in teacher education programs is the need to provide preservice teachers, particularly those in their first years of their program, with contextually relevant experiences in order to increase their knowledge of teaching (Rovegno, 1992a; Sebren, 1995). Besides increasing preservice teachers' knowledge of teaching, research has revealed that school-based experiences enhance their knowledge about elementary school students and their movement patterns (Clarke & Hubball, 2001; Rovegno, 1992b) and the physical education curriculum (Clarke & Hubball, 2001; Rovegno, 1992a; Sebren, 1995).

The delivery model for this university course was designed to fulfill three primary functions. First, from a university perspective, there is a continuous challenge for faculty to provide contextually relevant information in courses that are designed to develop the content and pedagogical knowledge of preservice teachers. All too frequently academic courses are delivered at the university with little or no opportunity for the preservice teachers to determine whether the information they are acquiring is relevant or not to how curricula are implemented by teachers in schools. In order for curriculum and instructional information in these courses to be meaningful and influence the development of relevant values, abilities and knowledge preservice teachers need to observe curriculum 'come alive' in the context of the elementary school classroom. They

need to implement information about effective instructional strategies with children to gain personal meaning about what teaching means. And finally, if preservice teachers are going to understand children, they need opportunities to interact with them in a school setting. To accomplish all of this, the typical delivery model for this course had to shift from the university to include the elementary school.

The second function to be served by the change in the delivery model of the university course related to the issue of providing effective teacher inservice. The principal realized that if the elementary school teachers participated in these school-based experiences over the course of a year, they would be provided with some sustained inservice which could have a positive influence on the development of their pedagogical skills and their content knowledge of elementary school physical education.

The third function associated with this school-based delivery model was to enhance the learning of the elementary school students. With twenty four university students sharing the instruction of classes in the elementary school, student-teacher ratios ranged from one to one to two or three to one. The amount of personal instruction and practice time provided to the elementary students greatly enhanced the amount and quality of learning that could be accomplished within any one lesson.

The University Professor's Perspective

To assist the development of effective teaching strategies in the preservice teachers a series of developmentally designed, school-based teaching experiences was developed. This series of school-based learning began with the preservice teachers observing the faculty member teach some demonstration physical education lessons to a class of elementary students. While in this observation role they had no responsibility for any of the teaching/learning decisions involved in the delivery of the lesson. They were non-participant observers of the lesson. Gradually over the series of field experiences, specific pedagogical behaviours were added. They started with simply observing student movements and delivering feedback to the students about their movement responses. In the next field experience they adapted the content of the learning experiences (tasks) that were developed by the professor, observed student responses, and delivered feedback. In the final experience the preservice teachers designed their own learning experiences, taught them to the students, observing their responses and delivered feedback to them.

Delivering a university course within the context of an elementary school has transformed the learning of the preservice teachers. What these students learn, how they learn and in fact why it is important to learn were dramatically influenced by what they see and do in these school-based experiences. In the words of one third year university student at the end of the year: "I have learned the importance of teaching material that reaches the students and challenges them to grow, while facilitating this growth with a positive learning environment. Through these school experiences, I have gained confidence in teaching and more specifically, I now believe that I can in fact teach PE

successfully! I was skeptical of my own abilities but in this short time, I have gained a new perspective on my abilities (as a teacher)” (Vandaelle, 2008). This delivery model is quite novel and is the only academic course that provides these students with experiences teaching children in a school setting prior to their formal practicum at the end of the year.

Shifting the course from the isolated world of the university into the dynamic setting of a school provides for a much broader and richer community in which to learn. From the university students’ perspective, the sources of learning shift from relying entirely upon the limited dynamics of the traditional university-based course to include what life in the school can teach them, what the elementary students can teach them, and finally what the elementary teachers can teach them. This entire learning community provides a very different, more comprehensive set of learning experiences that inform and shape the preservice teachers’ perspectives about teaching, learning and the physical education curriculum.

From the university professor’s perspective, these school-based experiences are invaluable. They provide a setting to try out ideas and show the preservice teachers that the content of the course is relevant to the students in the school. The school experiences also keep the professor up to date with life in a school and the interests and abilities of the elementary school students. In short, if the university students can learn about the curriculum, teaching and elementary school students at the university and then apply this information successfully in their lesson planning and ultimately within their student teaching experiences, there is a certain degree of credibility about the content of the course that is nurtured. This in turn leads to the development of confidence and competence in the preservice teacher which is one of the major goals of the course.

The Preservice Teacher’s Perspective

As a preservice teacher, the gap between theory and practice can often appear daunting, clouded with uncertainty and therefore intimidating. Through my experience in two physical education curriculum and instruction courses, I have learned that the fissure between theory and practice can be crossed through a school-based delivery model. This course delivery model has developed my understanding of curriculum, teaching, and children in physical education. Further, the learning that occurred in these courses has transferred to other courses in the elementary teacher education program. Ultimately this model of learning has transformed my teacher attitudes and beliefs.

My understanding of curriculum, teaching and children has improved as a result of my school-based experiences. These experiences required me to move from the comforts of a university classroom into the heart of the learning community - an elementary school. This shift in where my learning occurred has provided practical experience in an authentic environment. It has promoted my understanding of curriculum beyond just thinking about curriculum to seeing it come alive with children and transformed my understanding of teaching from simply speculating about how I *might* teach to actually teaching. This approach to learning placed me, as a preservice teacher, in the position of teaching with the learner in mind while implementing a

developmentally appropriate curriculum. There is no substitute for the power of experience.

Specifically, as a preservice teacher, the idea of teaching educational gymnastics to a group of elementary students appeared impossible. Learning the critical features of gymnastics motor skills, identifying and sequencing learning activities and organizing a plan to implement these ideas did not elicit confidence in me to teach students. However, by learning the critical features of educational gymnastics, developing effective lessons and then delivering these lessons to a few elementary school students, I transitioned from replicating theory to experiencing the process of students' learning. I witnessed first hand a range of student abilities and how the curriculum and my teaching influenced their learning. What I learned through this 'hands on teaching experience' could not be achieved through a traditional university-based course.

I was placed in a series of developmental field experiences in which I assumed more and more responsibility for making the teaching/learning decisions. I started with one student and progressed to a small group of students by my last teaching visit. This allowed me to develop my teaching skills and my confidence to teach over time and according to my own personal needs. As my competence and confidence in teaching grew so did the amount and nature of what I learned.

The school-based model of learning in this university course encouraged personal reflection and accountability. Because each field experience built upon the previous experience, there was a need to reflect on what went well and what needed to be changed in my selection of student learning experiences and my teaching strategies so that I was confident in what I was going to do during the next field experience. The feedback that I received from my instructor and the elementary students was extremely valuable during this personal reflection. There was immediate and realistic accountability for the decisions I made as a teacher because the elementary students were relying on me to make appropriate pedagogical decisions. Their learning was at stake if I did not make appropriate decisions.

Through this school-based delivery model, I was able to develop a much more thorough understanding of children. Elementary school experiences with different grades of students gave me a tangible understanding of how children of different ages, act, think, learn, and respond in classroom settings as well as to me. Having the opportunity to create and share with the students the "ah-ha moments" in their personal learning was extremely powerful and rewarding. These moments and the influence they had on my development as a teacher would simply never occur in a traditional, university-based course. The learning that occurred in the field-based course caused a shift in learning. A shift occurred from focusing on my personal acquisition of knowledge about curriculum, teaching and children to how will I assist in the learning of the elementary school students as a consequence of what I had learned about curriculum and teaching. A shift from simply theoretical to practice based upon theory.

Of interest is the influence this school-based course in physical education had on what and how I learned in other courses in this teacher education program. What I learned about curriculum, teaching, and elementary students in physical education influenced my perspective and understanding in all my courses in the teacher education program. By experiencing a range of student abilities and interests within a specific class of students and having to plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences to accommodate these differences in physical education I have realized the need to think in this way in my planning in other curricula. The field experiences in physical education have provided me with a perspective and level of confidence that influences how I think about and teach in other subject areas. As an example, I applied a developmental approach as learned in the physical education course to my music methods course as I developed my lesson planning assignment. Lesson content was selected that would accommodate a variety of student abilities. When preparing for my peer teaching assignment in music, I applied what I learned about teaching in PE to how I taught my lesson to my peers. Both the lesson and the peer teaching experience were successful and I was confident that the content of the lesson that I was teaching was appropriate since I had experience working with the grade level during my PE methods courses. I also felt confident that I could teach to a range of student abilities.

The school-based model utilized in physical education caused a transformation in my attitudes and beliefs about teaching. At the start of my physical education course, I lacked confidence in my abilities to teach children. The course provided meaning and relevance to all that I had been learning about teaching. When asked what role the field experiences had on my development as a teacher I responded,

The course content has been invaluable, in that it has carefully and effectively incorporated theory and practice in an engaging, balanced manner. Through this course, I have learned effective teaching strategies that have given me confidence in approaching the instruction of physical education. Practical work with elementary students has solidified the course material efficiently while granting insight beyond textbooks into the real life development of elementary students. The result of this comprehensive instruction paired with scaffolded (Instructor-guided) practical experience has been an environment rich in learning where authentic connections between the theory of skills and the application of these skills are attained. I have greatly benefited from the practical component of this course and I consider scaffolded (instructor-guided) practical experience as one of the most impacting and powerful aspects of my education this year (Vandaele, 2007).

The community learning that I was a member of developed confidence that broke down some of the personal barriers of fear and intimidation that I possessed about PE instruction as well as my understanding of who I was as a teacher.

The school-based course also challenged me to move from a 'covering content' focus to a student learning/development focus. By instructing elementary students, I recognized teaching behaviours that I needed to change and develop in order to

effectively deliver quality instruction that focused on elementary student learning. I moved beyond thinking about myself, what I was going to say and the material that I was going to cover. I began to see the bigger picture of what education was about and to value student learning. I have grown from a sense of intimidation to a sense of competence and confidence in my teaching.

Looking at professional development in teaching as a cycle, preservice teacher education should begin to develop teacher knowledge and beliefs. This in turn influences teaching behaviours. What is missing in most teacher education curriculum and instruction courses is the opportunity to work with students. It is through working with students that a teacher gains relevant teaching experiences. These experiences, in turn, affect teaching efficacy which then changes teacher knowledge and beliefs. Without experience in schools, it is difficult to develop appropriate teacher knowledge and beliefs because the professional development cycle is not complete (Jordan & Stanovich, 1998).

By the time I reached my first practicum at the end of my first year in the teacher education program, I was able to successfully teach physical education and music. I gained further teacher knowledge and beliefs and I realized the value of early school experiences in my development as a teacher.

In 1897 John Dewey wrote, “Education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Dewey, p 78). My elementary school experiences in PE 310 and 311 have affecting profound personal change and professional development. This approach to teacher education builds a strong foundation for young teachers. Having the opportunity to experience elementary school students and experience teaching, learning and the curriculum come alive has been a catalyst in my transformation as a preservice teacher.

The Principal’s Perspective

Frank Hobbs Elementary School is a Kindergarten to Grade 5 school with a focus on a high level of success in academics, fine arts, fitness, and social responsibility. Diversity is achieved within its population of 289 students as a result of the registration of a high number of students with English as a Second Language along with a number of students identified with Special Needs in learning; these students are fully integrated into thirteen classroom divisions. Frank Hobbs is geographically situated in an area of Victoria usually described as an upper-middle class neighbourhood, however, our population also includes a number of economically vulnerable families. Most importantly, we are located in the centre of a vibrant professional community of learners—staff, students, and their parents—who collaboratively seek to continually improve student achievement across the curriculum each year. Community relationships have strongly supported us in this endeavor. The Frank Hobbs community has been enriched by collaborative relationships created with various organizations and businesses in the neighbourhood such as a Children’s centre and Out of School Care, a hospital that provides physical therapy facilities, the Sierra Club, Starbucks and a couple of local grocery stores.

Our school community has also benefited from a variety of collaborative opportunities with the University of Victoria. A number of valuable initiatives have existed over the years between Frank Hobbs and the University largely as a result of its close proximity to the University, but also as a consequence of the willingness and enthusiasm of the principal of Frank Hobbs and the staff to participate with the University. One such collaborative community learning relationship has existed for over a decade with Dr. Bell from the Faculty of Education at the University. During the time Dr. Bell has brought hundreds of his preservice teachers to teach and learn alongside hundreds of elementary school children and their classroom teachers. The Teachers attend Dr. Bell's classes and have the opportunity to observe their students participate actively in whole group instruction provided by Dr. Bell or in small group instruction with teams of his preservice teachers.

Since one of the goals of the school-based course was to provide teachers with sustained inservice in physical education a short questionnaire was distributed to them. The purpose of the questionnaire was to allow the teachers to anonymously provide feedback about how this unique professional learning relationship contributed to their learning about the physical education curriculum, teaching physical education, and their students. All Teachers described the relationship as a 'win/win situation':

Students love Dr. Bell's classes and benefit from demonstrations and instruction from him; then they get small group instruction from his class. Rarely are we able to get small group instruction in PE. I also know that the university students are very excited to "try out" their lesson plans on 'real' students. They get a chance to see why things worked, how they could have taught progressions differently or how they could improve it the next time.

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Teachers identified an increase in their knowledge about the physical education curriculum and the pedagogy utilized to implement the curriculum. They identified these experiences as extra learning opportunities for their students. For example, the lessons on educational gymnastics were identified by some teachers as not something they would do on their own with a class as they would not be comfortable teaching gymnastics—especially using large equipment. However, for other teachers, after seeing the skill breakdown and sequence of learning along with some class organizational structure and management skills associated with gymnastics, there was an increase in their comfort level in teaching gymnastics and their knowledge of the safety issues associated with this part of the physical education curriculum.

Teachers also reported how they have introduced new movements and new ideas into their teaching which they hadn't done before. Examples of this include great warm-up activities that keep all students moving in a focused way. Teachers indicated they

learned new and interesting ways to introduce and develop motor skills. Of greatest importance to teachers was learning about developmentally appropriate activities for their students and learning how motor skills can be broken down at appropriate levels. For example, in teaching games, teachers observed motor skill breakdown that was not just to develop better games players but to show how rules are developed and why. All the teachers indicated that the field experiences provided them with new movements and games they hadn't done before. In addition, some teachers have been inspired to seek out other resource materials to help them teach physical education.

Moreover, teachers commented on how the field experiences enabled them to reflect on best practices. This reflection has resulted in an increase in their confidence and capacity to transform their physical education lessons and build on their current knowledge base. They have identified these experiences as the best professional development because they have the opportunity to observe and experiment with ideas in between field experiences. They get to see physical education lessons in action instead of just reading about them.

Teachers also commented on the need to plan their physical education lessons in order to maximize the amount of time their students are physically active. They also plan to use the management techniques demonstrated by Dr. Bell to help maximize the activity time for their students. While teachers recognized that each half hour lesson provided only a snap shot of what you can do in their PE program they are learning different ways to teach things they already know and think about how to incorporate ideas with things that are already going well in their PE classes.

Teachers commented on how Dr. Bell's lessons have caused them to think about how they are going to allow all students, including students with special needs, to be successful in physical education. Important questions such as how can they involve students regardless of their level of skill development without boring some and overwhelming others and how can they shift the focus of the lesson away from the game to a focus on adapting the game to match the variety of developmental needs of their students now guide their lesson planning.

Teachers noted that the field experiences allowed them to learn so much about their students by observing them being taught by other teachers. They were provided the opportunity to see why some things worked with some of their students and not for others. They could focus their attention on individual students for as long as they wished. They could identify which students watched demonstrations, who listened to instructions, and who was able to complete a particular motor skill. They could see how their students reacted and adjusted to different methods of teaching and new activities. They could identify where their students were developmentally within an activity and develop lesson plans about where to go from there

A very interesting and unexpected observation expressed by some of the school children to their teachers was about how the adults or preservice teachers changed over

time. The children noticed an improvement in their teaching between the classes they taught them.

Conclusion

The shared learning in this community of learners has improved the physical education program for children and the teachers who teach it. There is an on-going transformation in teaching practices to maximize learning opportunities for students in the physical education lessons. The teachers have reported that student learning is enhanced by them participating in these field experiences. The community partnership has also enriched the learning of the preservice teachers. The elementary school provides them with the opportunity to learn in a contextually relevant setting. The field experiences provide the university professor with the opportunity to maintain a connection to schools and children that helps to ensure that course content is current and credible. Each member of this learning community has co-laboured on a collaborative team to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable as each must contribute (DuFour, 2008). A win, win, win learning community.

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