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Professional Development Plan

As I finish my final year as an undergraduate and begin my teaching journeys, it is important that I begin to explore both my role as a teacher in the classroom and those of the various professionals I will continue to work with each day in a school. As well, in the future I plan to advance my education through graduate school, and I am beginning to define my educational interests and fields of study. While my most important immediate goal may be to find a school that meshes with my philosophies, and obtain a job, I also need to think about my continued professional growth and the places it may take me.

First and foremost, my main goal upon graduation and receiving a teaching license will be to secure a job as a teacher. However, it is not enough for me to settle for the first opportunity that presents itself, as I need to be sure that I am going to teach in a school and district that will be a good match for my teaching philosophies. After completing my student teaching abroad, I am confident that teaching overseas is an opportunity I should pursue. I believe that living and teaching abroad has already given me an experience like none other, and the challenge of everyday life in a new culture is a learning experience for me. Teaching outside of America has helped to foster in me the ability to step outside my comfort levels and embrace the unknown, which has given me a new sense of curiosity and excitement that I am able to pass on to my students. To reach my goal of teaching abroad, I plan to attend the University of Northern Iowa's international job fair in February of 2008. While there, I will have the opportunity to explore my options for teaching overseas by engaging in conversation and possible interviews with representatives from a wide array of schools and geographic regions. As a first year teacher, I am leaving my options open for a location to teach. It will

be most important, then, to make the most of this job fair by investigating schools and asking questions about the philosophies and practices that are unique to each.

While I realize that each school is different, and each country has different cultural and educational values, there are certain general aspects that I will look for in a potential school. First of all, I am looking for a school that embraces a constructivist philosophy of learning: a place where there is a focus on the students and a community of learning is fostered. To me, this means that students are in a safe environment and feel free to express their independent and creative views. As well, cooperative learning should be a daily part of the school life; teachers and students engage in dialogue for the purpose of learning and interacting. I would like a school district where teachers do not see themselves as the sole givers of knowledge to the students, but rather as guides to their students' learning. Student voices are not suppressed, and there is evidence of a democratic school and classroom environment.

While my main focus is on the students and the learning environment, it is also important to explore the role of the administration and the relationships between staff members in a school. I believe that an environment of professionalism and dedication to students is important to thriving as a teacher, and open lines of communication are integral to this process. I would not want to work in a school district where teachers are subject to the will of those in charge. If teachers feel that they can bring issues to the table and discuss school life in a non-threatening setting, I believe that a strong relationship between teachers and administrators can be achieved. I would prefer to work in a school where the administrators have had experience working with children in a classroom setting and are generally interested in the success of their students for the sake of learning. To me, a school district that depends only on state-mandated and provided materials for teaching, and insists

that teachers teach only to the specific curriculum tests is not an environment of exploration and learning.

As well, I would like to work in a school where teachers form a community with each other between grade levels. When teachers collaborate with each other to work through classroom issues, curricular discussions and engage in conversation related to personal growth, I believe that it is beneficial both to the staff and the students. I want to be a part of a school that encourages individual and collaborative creativity and growth. Neither teachers nor students should feel stifled by the school environment; rather, they should feel energized and have the confidence to explore. I also find it important that the school encourages continuing teacher education of its staff, whether this is through the form of professional development courses and seminars, providing opportunities to attend conferences or lectures or encouraging teachers to attend graduate school.

Aside from being a teacher in a school, I have also researched the role of a reading specialist. At Katoh Elementary School in Numazu, Japan, Theresa Binning works with mainly ESL students as a Reading Recovery specialist. The goal of the Reading Recovery program is to provide students with a short-term intervention, offering one-on-one lessons between the student and the specialist in order to reinforce reading and literacy. The goal of the program is to aid students who have difficulty learning to read, as well as allow students to take part in the regular classroom activities. When students meet the grade-level expectations, their individual programs are ended. In most schools where this program is used, it is mainly for 1st grade students. However, at Katoh, this program is adapted to meet the needs of its unique students. Students who are a part of Reading Recovery are usually at high literacy levels in their first language, so it is a program to assist those who struggle with English. Also, the students who are a part of the program are not restricted to 1st grade, and Theresa works with students from all of the primary grades. Students usually leave the class

during their normal English period, going to Theresa's room for instruction, but still keep up with the weekly spelling tests and other classroom activities, such as journal entries or special projects. Theresa acknowledged the differences of these adaptations – students in a normal Reading Recovery program have short lessons (about 20 minutes), while her lessons are about 40 minutes. Also, she needs to incorporate both the Reading Recovery curriculum goals and the Scott Foresman goals in her lessons, and the programs have structures that are very different from each other. Students are recommended for the program on a rolling basis as the need arises, and parents are contacted to also be a part of the decision process. While Reading Recovery teachers do not need to hold a master's degree, they must complete a required, one-year training period and have at least three years' experience working with primary-age children. In most school districts, teachers are chosen to apply for the program. Continuing professional development opportunities are offered to teachers after the initial training period, and teachers who wish to continue on in the Reading Recovery program may choose to attend graduate school and then complete training to become a tutor for other Reading Recovery specialists.

I find that this specialized job in a school is interesting, and I think that it would provide a teacher with many opportunities to individualize instruction and work to meet each student's needs. However, as I begin my teaching career, I am drawn to the classroom environment and being a part of students' everyday lives. I think that as a specialist, one is able to develop relationships with a few students, but it becomes more difficult to be a part of the regular classroom environment. In conversation with Theresa, she mentioned that the job can be very isolating, and when her students struggle, she takes more of the blame upon herself as their tutor. Also, another one of the reasons I enjoy teaching is the variety of subjects that I am providing learning experiences for, the creativity that subject integration allows and the challenges of curriculum and classroom management. While I don't think that

working as a specialist is necessarily devoid of all these characteristics, I feel that I am more suited to the role of a classroom teacher.

If I end up teaching somewhere in the States, the issue of teacher's unions also presents itself. To me, teacher unions are in place to protect a teacher's rights, and even more so when curricular materials and teaching methods are being imposed upon teachers by the government and other administrators who, in some cases, do not have the same training and background in schools that teachers do. This becomes important in the era of No Child Left Behind, when teachers are feeling more pressure to achieve the goals of the district and state, and it seems there is more emphasis on achievement than the development of the learning process in students. Unions, then, are in place to allow teachers a forum and support system to discuss educational policy and the effect it has on schools, as well as an assurance that teachers' rights are protected. The general idea is that teachers be given a place to voice their opinions and work together with the administrators and elected officials to create a climate of learning and ensure that every student is given a "quality education."

However, at the same time that unions purport to be the answer to the lack of communication between teachers and bureaucrats, there are also some general aspects of unions that make me wary. For example, unions are often the base for teacher strikes or work stoppages, which I find to be ineffective and losing sight of the goal of teaching altogether – to encourage and help students to learn and achieve in school. I do not agree with using confrontation and force as an effective tool for communication. Also, in some states, teachers who choose not to join a union are still subject to paying dues. As well, many teacher unions use dues to support partisan political campaigns instead of bringing it back to use in the individual communities. While the unions may bring to light important educational issues, there seems to be more politics involved in the process than actually working for the good of the schools and, most importantly, the students.

I have also looked, then, into the possibility of joining a teacher's organization, rather than a union. While the organizations are sometimes more of a grassroots campaign, I think that they are more based in collaboration and focused on teachers and students, rather than the politics of education. As well, some of the organizations also offer liability and legal protection, which is a benefit of joining a union. Teacher's organizations don't initiate teacher strikes, collective bargaining, and as well as unions, include members from all functions of the school. While organizations vary by state, there are also national organizations such as the American Association of Educators.

In the future, I also plan to advance my own education through graduate school. While I have interests in a few different areas of elementary education and am graduating with a language arts endorsement, I also wish to pursue a graduate education with a focus on international experiences. As I intend to travel after graduation, I am interested in learning more about teaching in an international setting and effectively working with students from a variety of backgrounds. I am also interested in online graduate programs, as I believe it may be the best opportunity for me to continue my teaching career and lifestyle without having to relocate to a specific place for two years. To that end, I am interested in the Global Studies in Education program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This program is an online program – students complete eight courses in about two years time, through part-time studies without any on-campus requirement. This program would allow me to continue my life without relocating, and it also gives me the opportunity to interact with professionals from around the world. According to the website (<http://gse.ed.uiuc.edu/program.html>), “The GSE Online program is based on the realization that the world has become inextricably interconnected as well as interdependent, and educators cannot afford to ignore this new reality.” The program helps teachers to develop their curriculum and pedagogy in an international sense, bringing about an awareness of

global issues and helping teachers to develop with their students what it means to be a “citizen of the world.”

Using an online format for education would allow me to stay connected with a core group of students through e-mail, discussion boards and chat rooms, as well as work from any location and adapt classes to my schedule. The courses are constructed with the idea that teachers be able to directly apply what they are learning in their classrooms, which I believe is one of the most beneficial ways to learn – through experience and reflection. There are five core courses and three electives – one course each during the spring and fall, and two courses during a summer session. Elective courses are offered both online or at partnering universities around the world, and there is the opportunity for a study abroad course during the two years. There are also opportunities to attend conferences and an orientation program, which would allow me to further connect with the other students and possibly meet everyone in person.

This program appeals to me because it seems as though it would be flexible enough to fit my lifestyle and would allow me to continue to teach, in order to apply the fundamental skills I am learning through the program in my classroom. I believe strongly in the program’s philosophies, that our world is becoming more and more interconnected, and I think that it would be an enriching learning experience to work with other students interested in the same fields of study and other professional educators working around the world. The opportunity to attend universities in a variety of countries or participate in a study abroad program is also something that I believe would be an experience like none other.

In my professional life, it will also be important to stay informed of educational research and practices that are of interest to me. While I may subscribe to journals and magazines that cover a variety of education-related topics, such as *The Elementary School Journal* or *Teacher* magazine, I will also look into journals that are directed specifically to my specialties. Since I am interested in language arts and reading education, I think that

being able to read about current research and best practices in order to expand my teaching repertoire and gain a variety of perspectives. Two journals that I may subscribe to are *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts*. As well, I would like to keep up with issues in multicultural and global education, so a journal such as *Multicultural Perspectives* would also be of interest to me. Another resource that I will use as a teacher is the internet, which is an invaluable tool for keeping up with current news and politics regarding education, as well as the possibility of joining in on teacher-oriented discussion boards and websites to share ideas and practices with each other. Online subscriptions to journals would also allow me to access the literature without the constraint of location.

Along with reading and keeping up with research through subscriptions to professional journals and magazines, another option for learning and growing as a professional will be to take part in educational conferences. In the States, there are two distinct conferences that have piqued my interest. One of the conferences that I may look into attending is put on by the International Reading Association (IRA). During the IRA conference, attendees are able to hear from keynote speakers and authors from a variety of genres, as well as go to breakout sessions that help to enhance reading education in the classroom – learning about best practices and current research, children’s literature, and issues relating to literacy and reading. Another conference that seems to cover more aspects of education, including policy and individual classroom strategies as well as curriculum issues, is the conference put on by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Depending on where I teach, I also plan to take the time to seek out conferences and professional development opportunities that are available in the surrounding community.

Overall, my professional development is a commitment to myself and my continued desire to learn. One of the most important ways for me to do this is to continue to write a

journal about my teaching experiences. I think that by writing my ideas and thoughts down, I am better able to reflect on what I am learning and start to identify threads of my teaching and learning that are important for me to follow. The dedication to being a teacher is not only about providing opportunities and supporting my students, but also to supporting myself. As well, I plan to continue to search out literature that is focused on constructivist philosophy and applying it in the classroom, as it is good for me to make connections between theory and practice, and one of the many ways to do that is to read essays and other texts that are both encouraging and stimulating for me as an individual. Engaging in conversation with the teaching community at my school and keeping an open mind about everything will allow me to make the most of any teaching experience.

In the end, a professional development plan is only a plan – what is most important to me is that I am working to further my learning and encourage and support my students, wherever I find myself in the future. There is a lot of uncertainty in beginning a teaching career, from finding the right school to beginning the first year, but that also means that there are so many opportunities for experiential learning. My dedication to my own learning and passion for my job and life are going to push me to achieve my dreams, and while my path may end up completely different from my initial visions, that's all part of the growing process.