

FIRST

FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON STUDENTS AND TEACHING

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Recognition of Previous Editors

The Forum for International Research on Students and Teaching is the evolution of Research and Teaching in Developmental Education (RTDE), the scholarly journal of the New York College Learning Skills Association. For over thirty years, RTDE provided a space to share best practices for faculty and staff engaged in the often-challenging task of supporting students as they transitioned – either from high school, work, or international studies – to the college classroom. We extend sincere thanks to the editors of RTDE for their years of service to the academic research and scholarship essential to our profession.

Rita Pollard, Fall 1985 1(1) – Fall 1987 3(1)

Rob Erwin & Janet Snoyer, Spring 1987 3(2), Spring 1988 4(2), Spring 1989 5(2) – Spring 1990 6(2)

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Marie Hannan-Mandel Spring 2011 27(2) – Spring 2017 33(2)

Kim Ballerini, Fall 2017 – Spring 2019

Jesse M. Redlo and Emily S. Ryan Radder, Fall 2019, Special Issue

Jesse M. Redlo, Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, Special Issues

Letter from the Editor

Our journal continues to slowly evolve into an open access resource for scholar practitioners in our field. The unexpected need to move to a new layout software delayed our delivery of the fall issue, but it also encouraged us to embrace digital publishing. We have removed columns from our publication as they can be difficult for screenreaders to navigate, even when properly set up. We have moved away from filling the column with text as creating blank spaces can make it harder to read. We will continue to refine our new layout design with future issues and would appreciate any feedback you may have on our current look.

This brief issue focuses on professional practice grounded in theory. Falzone and Poland's article, "Practice with Purpose: Experiential Literacy Instruction Grounded in Choice Theory," presents the importance of theoretical perspectives when designing learning experiences. Their study reflects on the powerful changes we can make within our curriculum to support our students as they develop their professional skills. Similarly, the Laff's article from our *RTDE* archives challenges us to consider how our academic and student affairs efforts intersect in order to support the student holistically. Together, these articles emphasize the importance of intentionally designing learning opportunities for the students in our care.

Finally, we end our issue with a new column. We recognize and value the connection between theoretical frameworks and our professional practices, but sometimes theory gets lost in our day-to-day work. The Theoretical Frameworks column is an opportunity to explore theoretical frameworks within our institutional contexts. Our first column by Arnob K. Saha focuses on Sanford's Challenge and Support Theory. We hope that Saha's synopsis and application of Sanford's Challenge and Support Theory encourage you to reflect on the theoretical frameworks that drive your professional practice.

Safe journeys,

Nichole LaGrou

Practice with Purpose: Experiential Literacy Instruction Grounded in Choice Theory

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Abstract

This paper explores a collaborative initiative between a private, independent liberal arts university and a local school district that integrates experiential learning into a foundational literacy course for teacher candidates, guided by the principles of Glasser's Choice Theory. Designed to address shared challenges in both higher education and P-12 settings, this partnership offers teacher candidates meaningful, hands-on experience in literacy instruction while providing targeted literacy support to underserved elementary students. The initiative demonstrates how purposefully designed, reciprocal P-20 partnerships can enhance teacher preparation and promote literacy in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: teacher education, partnerships in education, P-20 collaborative partnerships, university-district partnerships, Glasser's Choice Theory, experiential learning, educational planning, literacy

Introduction

The role of teachers is evolving, and now more than ever, innovative teacher education programs are needed to prepare educators for creating collaborative and engaging learning environments. Teacher candidates need to learn how to build relationships with students, inspire learning, meet diverse needs, and work with colleagues. This article summarizes an experiential learning initiative embedded in a foundational literacy course through a partnership with a private liberal arts institution in the northeast and a local P-12 school district. This program is designed to have a mutually beneficial impact for both partners as it seeks to foster teacher candidates' preparation and enhance K-6 student engagement in reading and foundational literacy skills. Grounded in the benefits of P-20 collaborative partnerships, experiential learning, and Glasser's Choice Theory, the program emphasizes hands-on, real-world classroom experiences that support the growth of teacher

candidates in the planning and instructional process while improving youth literacy for underserved populations. This comprehensive approach equips teacher candidates with essential skills through experiential learning and collaboration and also enriches K-6 students' literacy, demonstrating the powerful impact of meaningful and collaborative P-20 educational experiences.

Program Background

The educational landscape is experiencing significant transitions, requiring ongoing collaboration between P-12 schools and institutions of higher education to support and strengthen quality instruction across both settings. P-12 school districts face a range of challenges, including declining literacy rates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023), an increasing demand for digital literacy skills (Hodges & Matthews, 2020), teacher shortages (Garcia & Weiss, 2020), and rising levels of teacher burnout (Sparks, 2022; Westphal, et al, 2022). At the same time, higher education institutions are grappling with declining enrollment, budget constraints, and limited resources (Salam, 2024; Marcus, 2025; Welding, 2025). Despite these obstacles, both P-12 schools and higher education institutions remain committed to delivering high-quality, effective instruction; however, they may struggle to do so in isolation. Strengthening partnerships between these sectors can help address systemic challenges and foster innovation in teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

The collaborative partnership described in this paper was designed to serve teacher candidates and elementary-aged students. Within our teacher preparation program, observational field placement experiences in an educational setting are required for second-year teacher candidates. These experiences vary significantly with the amount of hands-on application that teacher candidates may have, limiting their opportunity to apply theoretical content in the classroom. As the focus of best practices for teaching literacy shifts, we wanted teacher candidates to apply their knowledge of literacy instruction rather than learning about it theoretically in an attempt to formulate their own foundational understanding of literacy instruction. In turn, an elementary school situated in the P-12 school district neighboring the university was seeking additional literacy intervention for its students in grades 3-6. To support the needs of both institutions, a partnership was established between the university's teacher preparation program and the local elementary school. For the purpose of this paper, teacher candidates will refer to the undergraduate students enrolled in the foundations of literacy course at the higher education institution and elementary-aged students who were selected to participate in the program from the K-12 school district will be referred to as the students.

Theoretical Framework

The program's creation was guided by foundational pillars that are supported by research and document benefits for student learning and engagement. The four pillars include P-20 partnerships, experiential learning, co-teaching, and reflective practice.

P-20 partnerships

The first foundational pillar is grounded in research regarding P-20 collaborative partnerships. Creating P-20 partnerships to strengthen our education system, reform teacher training, and foster content and contextual expertise of teacher candidates is not new. Stemming from national reports by

the Carnegie Forum (A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century: The Report for the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession; 1986), the Holmes Group (Tomorrow's Teachers; 1986), and more recently Arthur Levine's Educating School Teachers (2006), there has been consensus that fostering P-20 partnerships is a key strategy to create successful teacher education reform and to improve student outcomes, especially for marginalized and underrepresented student populations (Burton & Greher, 2007; Michaels et al., 2011; Nevarez & Rico, 2007; Nunez & Oliva, 2009; Olivia, 2008; Walpole, 2007). In addition, as Rousseau (2007) argues, P-20 collaborative partnerships are "necessary to reframe the nation's educational agenda." (p.48).

Such partnerships support innovation, change, profitability, shared resources, organizational vitality, and increased efficiency, in part because both K-12 and post-secondary partners take ownership of persistent problems such as student performance and share in the responsibility for educating the nation's youth (Clifford & Millar, 2008; Jarsky et al., 2009). For example, in a study focusing on an interdisciplinary partnership to support Chicano/Latino youth, findings by Moran et al. (2009) indicate a result of the partnership was the creation of flexible governance structures that focus on common goals and the use of theoretical constructs and data-driven decisions to design, evaluate, and improve the partnership and identified outcomes.

More critical is the impact such partnerships may have on youth participating in a collaborative partnership, especially for those who are marginalized. General findings indicate elevated achievement in challenging mathematics and science courses, an increase in student graduation and university enrollments, an improved transition from secondary to postsecondary educational institutions, and improved student motivation, reading, and writing skills (Domina & Ruzek, 2012; Pomeroy, 2010; Hafner et al., 2010; Hondzel et al., 2019). In addition, research by Hafner et al. (2010) and Harnik and Ross (2018) indicate that partnerships also have a positive impact on teachers' instructional practices and strategies, leading to teaching more creatively and with greater knowledge and confidence.

Experiential Learning

The second foundational pillar of the program is based upon the body of research that argues there are multiple benefits to providing experiential learning activities for all those involved. Experiential learning can be briefly described as learning activities that are hands-on, engage the learner by linking real-world experiences into classroom learning, and encourage reflection (Lewis & Williams, 1994; Wright, 2000). In essence, experiential learning seeks to bridge the gap between the theory of a course and the real-world application of such theories. Activities range from short-term experiential learning opportunities, such as field trips, observations, and real-life scenarios brought to the classroom, to a more traditional semester or year-long apprenticeship or an internship experience (Lewis & Williams, 1994).

Despite the diverse methods of experiential learning, research consistently highlights positive outcomes for students, including enhanced career awareness, development, and workplace readiness (Chickering, 1977; Cantor, 1997; Coker & Porcher, 2015; Gore & Nelson, 1984; Rippetoe, 1977). Additionally, experiential learning fosters improved communication and relationship-building skills, increased community involvement, and significant intellectual growth (Sobal et al., 1981; Spooner et al., 2008). For instance, Spooner et al. (2008) found that student teachers in a year-long

teaching experience reported stronger relationships with their supervising teachers and a deeper understanding of school policies and procedures compared to those in a semester-long experience. Other studies have noted a deeper commitment to community involvement (Kendrick, 1996) and increased engagement in both their own learning and that of others (Grant et al., 1981). Furthermore, experiential learning has been shown to enhance problem-solving, critical thinking, methodological thinking skills, and interpersonal relationships (Scarce, 1999; Cantor, 1997; Coleman, 1976; Wright, 2000; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2020,). It's important to note that the perceived benefits of experiential learning can vary based on specific contexts, learning objectives, and participants. While these benefits are widely recognized, individual experiences and research findings may provide nuanced insights into their effectiveness.

Co-Teaching

A third foundational pillar of the program is grounded in the value collaborative teaching models have for teachers and students. Although teaching can be considered a lonely profession (Neto, 2015), schools continue to adopt practices that require collaboration, such as inclusive classrooms, integrated academic curricula, and test analysis. Achieving an effective co-planning/teaching relationship is a complex endeavor (Pratt, 2013). Teacher candidates need guidance to develop the necessary communication, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills needed to think critically and creatively in a manner that brings diverse perspectives and expertise together. Although teacher candidates learn the benefits of creating a collaborative and inquiry-based instructional model in a teacher education program, they often lack practical experience engaging in meaningful discourse about teaching and learning and the collaborative skills needed for successful co-teaching (Brown & Viator, 2019; McHatton & Daniel, 2008). Yet, as schools continue to seek creative ways to foster engaging classrooms that are relevant for today's students, models of collaborative instruction provide worthwhile benefits, such as improved student academic performance and positive perceptions of teachers and the classroom environment (Wagner et al., 2024; Sears et al., 2021).

Reflective Practice

A fourth foundational pillar of the program is rooted in the advantages of reflection and reflective practice for teachers. Reflective practice as an essential component in teacher education programs and a means to support the continuous development of teachers can be dated back to the days of Dewey and his text *How We Think* (1933). As Dewey (1933) describes, the art of reflection is an active and systematic process of thinking where one carefully examines one's own personal beliefs, experiences, and understandings in light of current experiences. It is a continuous process that encourages critical thinking and problem-solving with an open mind (Canning, 1991). Building on Dewey's reflective framework, Schön's (1983) reflective practice model proposes two types of reflection that teachers should engage in: reflection in action and reflection on action, with the former happening when a teacher's reflection on an experience leads to immediate action. The latter happens as a result of looking back and reflecting on one's experiences, leading to potential adjustments or modifications (Schön, 1983). Although Hébert (2015) argues that the term "reflection" is frequently overused and simplified, cautioning practitioners to thoroughly evaluate their reflective models before assuming that reflection alone will lead to improved teaching practices, it remains evident that reflection serves as a crucial tool for continuous growth, learning, and adaptation to support student outcomes.

Program Details

In our teacher preparation program, all teacher candidates complete six credit hours of literacy coursework that requires 20 hours of field observation per three-credit-hour course. They begin with an introductory course that builds a foundational understanding of literacy and effective instructional practices, followed by a specialized literacy course aligned with their certification grade range (e.g., elementary or secondary). These courses are offered during the fall and spring semesters, with each section capped at 25 teacher candidates.

Since the program's inception in 2018, our sections of the foundational literacy course have integrated the program described in this paper in place of the 20-hour field observation requirement, making it a core component of our instruction. This experiential learning course differs from the traditional course with field observation because we teach this course on-site at the elementary school, allowing us to blend theory with practice in a meaningful way. Teacher candidates arrive at the elementary school and are provided with instruction that is dedicated to building foundational knowledge of literacy development and effective instructional strategies. Teacher candidates have direct access to the district's adopted literacy curriculum, instructional materials, and manipulatives. In addition, they benefit from district guest speakers such as literacy coaches and administrators. This immersive setting enhances teacher candidates' understanding by allowing them to observe literacy instruction in action, bridging the gap between coursework and real-world application.

Following our scheduled class time with teacher candidates, the after school literacy program with elementary-aged students begins. On designated days, selected students in grades 3-6 remain after school to receive targeted literacy instruction crafted by our teacher candidates under faculty supervision. Teacher candidates work in small groups to plan and deliver lessons tailored to the specific strengths and needs of the students they support, based on data and discussions from class and district personnel. Instruction focuses on key areas such as phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing, and more. Students are identified by the district's data team as needing additional intervention, typically falling into tier 2 or tier 3 support levels. As a designated New York State Target School, the school serves a high number of students who benefit from the additional support this program offers. This mutually beneficial model provides teacher candidates with meaningful, hands-on teaching experience while offering individualized, targeted literacy support to underserved elementary students.

Instructional Model

The program's success is due to the course's instructional methodology, which is grounded in Glasser's Choice Theory (1998) and the value of experiential learning. This course provides a foundational understanding of literacy development, effective literacy instruction, and assessment for diverse learners. During a time when there are competing ideologies surrounding the best approach to reading and an understanding that not one factor is sufficient to address the challenges of teaching reading in the 21st century (Pearson et al., 2023), this course emphasizes a foundational understanding of literacy by exploring various pedagogies and instructional strategies. As teacher candidates learn about these pedagogies and apply various approaches with students, they begin to construct their own understanding of the complexity of literacy instruction.

Glasser's Choice Theory

Dr. William Glasser's Choice Theory is a psychological framework that emphasizes personal responsibility and the power of choice in human behavior. It suggests that all human actions are driven by an inherent desire to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998). According to Glasser (1998), "choice theory explains that, for all practical purposes, we choose everything we do" (p. 3). Individuals are responsible for their own behavior and make choices based on their perceptions of the world in an effort to fulfill these needs. Choice Theory rejects external control and instead focuses on internal motivation, suggesting that the only person one can control is oneself. By understanding and applying this theory, individuals can improve their relationships, increase personal satisfaction, and create more effective and fulfilling lives through intentional and conscious decision-making (Glasser, 1998). This theory guided the experiential learning course for teacher candidates as a choice-driven teaching method. The five basic needs, in relation to the program, are described below.

Survival. Encompassing the need for health, safety, and security is a critical component of Glasser's theory (Glasser, 1998). As demographics consistently shift in our classrooms, teacher preparation programs must expose teacher candidates to the current realities of K-12 students across various school contexts. Beyond merely reading about student diversities, teacher candidates need to learn about, experience, and understand the complex differences students bring to the educational environment, beyond the traditional notions of diversity. The program operates in a low-income district with diverse and complex student needs, including ethnic and racial diversity, low academic performance (particularly in ELA/literacy), and reliance on free and reduced lunch programs. Teacher candidates need to understand and address their students' needs for survival appropriately.

This course emphasizes ways in which teacher candidates can build rapport with students, while practicing empathetic and active listening to meet their basic health, safety, and security needs, which is crucial for effective teaching. One specific example of how this is taught is through the use of a Reading Interest Inventory. By dissecting reading interest inventories, teacher candidates are provided with knowledge and understanding of what the tool is, how it is used, and the power it has for teacher-student relationships and learning experiences. Often, struggling readers express a dislike or lack of motivation for reading. By taking the time to understand students' preferences, such as genres, styles, and reading habits, as well as their access to reading materials and support both in and out of school, teachers can significantly impact their students' interests, motivation, and performance in reading. At the start of the program, teacher candidates create a reading interest inventory of their own that asks the most important questions they want to know about their students. The inventory is administered during the first session of the program, along with other ice-breaker activities, to learn about their students in order to plan future lessons accordingly. For example, teacher candidate X learns that student A prefers listening to a teacher or peer read aloud rather than reading aloud him/herself; therefore, teacher candidate X should plan to incorporate supportive reading strategies, such as choral or echo reading, to strengthen student A's oral fluency. This process also allows teacher candidates to build relationships with their students and create a safe learning environment for future sessions.

Belonging. Love and belonging are another component of Glasser's Choice Theory that addresses the need for connection, friendship, and intimate relationships. Education is a profession that relies on collaboration across various levels of interactions, including administrators, teachers, staff, parents, students, community partners, and others working together to create effective learning experiences. Teacher candidates must develop the skills to collaborate effectively with peers and colleagues, which is essential for their future careers. Learning how to work in teams, share ideas, and support one another not only prepares them for the collaborative nature of teaching but also enhances their ability to create a cohesive and supportive learning environment for their students. By engaging in collaborative activities during their training, teacher candidates build the necessary interpersonal and professional skills to navigate the challenges of the teaching profession and foster a culture of teamwork and mutual respect in their future schools. This, in turn, creates a sense of belonging that can mitigate the sense of isolation.

This course emphasizes collaboration through structured group activities and co-teaching opportunities. Reflection is a staple practice throughout the course and occurs at various times with various colleagues to broaden understanding of reflective practice. Teacher candidates are assigned to two different group sets as well as assigned a partner for pair work. These groups are often utilized to facilitate a constructivist method of teaching. The first group set is the teacher candidates' primary group and is assigned based on similarities in certifications (e.g., early childhood and childhood majors are grouped together, adolescent social studies majors are grouped together, etc.) to facilitate discussion around literacy expectations for the grades that they will eventually teach. The second group set is the teacher candidates' secondary group, which is assigned based on differences in certifications and includes members with certifications ranging from birth to grade 12. This is done to create a K-12 vertical approach for seamless collaboration across primary through upper grades and discussion around the progress of literacy expectations in K-12 classrooms. Lastly, teacher candidates are grouped in pairs for their co-teaching assignments. Pairs are responsible for planning, delivering, and reflecting on instruction collaboratively to meet the needs of their assigned elementary students. This encourages teacher candidates to listen to and respect each other's ideas. Their relationship strengthens throughout the semester as they continue to plan, teach, and reflect together.

The use of three group sets is designed to support teacher candidates in developing a sense of belonging because they are provided with multiple opportunities to collaborate with various individuals. For example, course time is provided for teacher candidates to debrief in larger groups, allowing them to check in with peers to identify common strengths and challenges within the instructional process, and answer scaffolded reflection questions provided by the instructor. This course highlights the importance of relationships, social connections, and community through the development of co-teaching and group debriefing, fostering a sense of mutual support among teacher candidates.

Power. Glasser's theory covers the fundamental aspects of power, including the need for achievement, competence, and recognition. The idea of power is extremely important within the context of a teacher preparation program. Throughout the learning process, teacher candidates need to develop a sense of personal and professional empowerment as they work toward becoming effective educators. Embedded within that is a sense of self-efficacy and a belief in their ability

despite the disappointment teachers often face in failing to meet the needs of their students (Hussain, 2022).

Teacher candidates begin to realize that success in a lesson is dependent on their willingness to be reflective and accept constructivist feedback from their professor and peers as a form of empowerment. We stress that in this context, success may not necessarily translate to a perfect lesson plan, but rather, it may include success with the writing of the lesson plan, integration of new instructional strategies and resources, breakthroughs with students, engagement, or effective collaboration with co-teachers. A coaching style of teaching is implemented to continuously guide and encourage teacher candidates to achieve success in the program. This approach helps teacher candidates recognize and build on their strengths, while also addressing areas for growth. During the program, we observe teacher candidates and student performance, often modelling an instructional approach or offering advice on instructional material, when needed. For example, if an elementary student needs scaffolding with a challenging text, we offer teacher candidates strategies to use during the reading that will support overall comprehension. We encourage teacher candidates to have individualized conversations with faculty to discuss the specifics of their lessons and provide guidance for the next steps. By reflecting on their achievements and receiving constructive feedback, teacher candidates gain a deeper understanding of their capabilities and the impact they can have as educators. This sense of accomplishment boosts their confidence and self-efficacy, preparing them to meet the diverse challenges of the teaching profession with competence and resilience.

Freedom. Another basic need described in Glasser's Choice Theory is freedom, which refers to the desire and ability to make choices about one's life and experiences. Individuals are eager to explore things that interest them and make decisions that align with their own values and goals. Within the field of education, we are struggling to find the right balance between curricular materials, including scripted programs and standardized assessments, and academic freedom. It is vital that teachers are granted choice within their teaching practice as too many restrictions may lead to frustration and disengagement.

This course encourages the fundamental need for choice. Within the program, teacher candidates are granted autonomy over their instruction. They are guaranteed the opportunity to select reading passages and instructional materials that best meet the instructional needs and personal interests of the students in their groups. Pulling on data obtained from their reading interest inventory, teacher candidates implement instructional approaches and materials that meet the learning styles and reading preferences as well as the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. Additionally, we encourage the exploration of materials that are innovative and effective. For example, teacher candidates may use resources such as Pear Deck and Canvas for presentation, Reading A-Z or NewsELA for reading passages, Kahoot or Flip Quiz for assessments, among many others. Exploring a variety of resources allows teacher candidates freedom with their instructional plans within the learning process.

Fun. The final basic need from Glasser's Choice Theory is fun. Beyond entertainment, fun is essential for an individual's overall well-being. Glasser argues that fun is a natural pathway to learning because it stimulates curiosity, creativity, and engagement (Glasser, 1998). When individuals experience enjoyment in their activities, they are more likely to absorb information, retain knowledge, and develop new skills. In educational settings, incorporating elements of fun can enhance motivation and reduce

stress, making learning a more effective and enjoyable process. Glasser's emphasis on fun underscores its importance as a vital component in achieving a balanced and fulfilling life.

Through this hands-on learning experience, teacher candidates are encouraged to engage and have fun in the learning process. We are breaking away from the traditional lecture-based undergraduate course format by offering a unique and innovative delivery at a local elementary school. This allows teacher candidates to meet and talk to classroom teachers and administrators and explore classroom environments, including classroom layout, seating arrangements, furniture, decorations, and other features, to consider what their future classroom setup may entail. Immersing teacher candidates in an elementary classroom environment allows them to deepen their understanding of course concepts and have fun applying their knowledge in a real-world setting.

Authors' Insight

We believe that in this program, providing opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in collaborative teaching and reflection facilitates both self-reflection and peer reflection, significantly impacting teaching practices. Although we have not yet conducted a formal empirical study on this program, years of implementation have yielded valuable insights through anecdotal notes, observations, and reflections. These informal data sources have helped us assess the program's impact on four key groups: teacher candidates, elementary students, district personnel, and university faculty.

Teacher Candidates

Teacher candidates have shared insights into their experiences participating in this program over the years. Through weekly reflections throughout the semester, end-of-the-semester exit interviews, and informal debriefing meetings, we have learned that teacher candidates' self-efficacy has improved from this experience. In relation to their understanding of literacy and literacy instruction, teacher candidates believe in their ability to deliver literacy instruction effectively. For example, one teacher candidate indicated that

participating in the program was beneficial to my journey as an educator. It made me more confident in how to lesson plan and try new things. As a sophomore at the time, it was very nice to put all these ideas into perspective that were talked about in my classes and conquer lesson planning for the first time.

This self-reported comment aligns with Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes the role of mastery experiences in building an individual's belief in their capabilities. They express that they feel more prepared to move into the next literacy course in their program sequence, as they used their gained knowledge as a foundation for teaching literacy in their intended grade range per their teaching certifications.

Additionally, they shared that this program has increased their curiosity in literacy and literacy instruction. As schools across the nation are utilizing different literacy-based programs, instructional materials, and personnel, they are eager to learn more about the various approaches being implemented and how these practices align with research-based instruction. This growing curiosity

reflects a deeper level of engagement, moving beyond mere compliance or ritual participation, which is often seen in traditional on-campus courses. According to Schlechty's (2002) model of student engagement, genuine engagement involves a high level of attention, commitment, and persistence. The teacher candidates in this program expressed interest in exploring a variety of instructional strategies and continued learning on course topics; therefore, suggesting that they are authentically engaged in their professional development as future educators.

Elementary Students

Elementary students have demonstrated behaviors that indicate success of the program both academically and socially-emotionally. Through observations and reflections from the teacher candidates, we have seen that many of the elementary students demonstrate increased confidence and a willingness to take risks in the learning process, reflecting a growth mindset. One teacher candidate stated, "The program gave teacher candidates the choice and freedom to experiment with developing lessons while focusing on student interests and engagement." Using books that are of interest, highly engaging, and outside of the mandated curriculum helps foster reading motivation. By providing instructional materials that are relevant to students' needs and interests, it aligns with key elements of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, specifically the need for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Another teacher candidate stated, "I was able to make activities and change them based on my students' likes and how they respond to certain activities and ask them what they would enjoy as well." Through consistent interactions and relationship building with teacher candidates, elementary students feel seen, valued, and supported, and working directly with assigned teacher candidates creates a learning environment where students can thrive.

Although elementary students are selected for this program based on assessment data and classroom teacher recommendations, some students request to return even after they no longer qualify. Elementary students feel a deep sense of connection and purpose with the program, directly aligning with elements of Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory, specifically the need for belonging, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and supportive scaffolding. These relationships are motivating for both their academic and social-emotional development, and they support and nurture students as capable learners.

District Personnel

Personnel from the district regularly express gratitude for the program and the ongoing partnership. This program began in a single school and has now expanded to two additional elementary schools. As a result, it now reaches elementary students in grades 3-6 across three school buildings, creating opportunities for a larger population of elementary students to benefit from consistent, small group literacy instruction. Additionally, district leaders have described this collaboration as a "full circle moment", as former teacher candidates who once participated in this program have since returned to the district as newly hired probationary teachers. Many of these educators are now teaching in the schools where they completed this field work experience. They continue to impact the academic and social-emotional development of underserved populations of students in the same environments that inspired their growth as future educators. An administrator from the district shared this testimony:

Teacher candidates experienced an authentic learning environment, where literacy strategies were emphasized and highly valued by the school community. Beyond literacy, these candidates also gained insights into the social and emotional needs of students and the barriers they encounter. Furthermore, the teacher candidates had the chance to extend their influence within the community. While situated on the outskirts of the city, the teacher candidates developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for the students' culture and backgrounds. In many cases, these teacher candidates returned to our city and district or similar urban settings to pursue their teaching careers.

This program fosters a strong sense of community for teacher candidates, creating a pipeline to urban districts. In turn, it has helped address teacher shortages and ensure that the educators entering the field are well-prepared and the best fit for districts with the greatest need.

University Faculty

Lastly, our personal reflections as university faculty and teacher educators are important to include. A constructivist approach (Fosnot & Perry, 2005) allows us to design learning experiences in which students actively construct their own knowledge and understanding of course content. As the K-12 school environment continues to evolve, with ongoing shifts, emerging instructional practices, and rapid integration of technology, it is crucial that we prepare teacher candidates to navigate these changes. Providing opportunities for them to critically reflect on real-world challenges and collaboratively explore solutions is an essential part of their development as thoughtful educators. Through our own reflections, we believe that this experiential learning program embodies that philosophy by placing candidates in authentic school contexts where they can apply theory to practice, engage in meaningful problem-solving, and build confidence through hands-on experiences.

Conclusion

This learning experience is situated at a pivotal point in our teacher preparation program as teacher candidates culminate their foundational coursework. By incorporating Glasser's Choice Theory and focusing on the five basic human needs of survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun, we provide a valuable learning opportunity that equips our teacher candidates for the evolving demands of the profession. As the role of a teacher continues to change, it is essential for teacher preparation programs to offer experiential learning opportunities in partnership with P-12 school districts. These collaborative experiences create a positive impact for university students, P-12 schools, and community partners alike, fostering growth and mutual benefit for all involved. While the authors' insights provide valuable context, an empirical study is a necessary next step to systematically evaluate the program's success. Given the program was initially created as an experiential learning opportunity to support teacher candidates in their professional growth, examining the instructional model and its alignment with Glasser's theory for learning can inform both future practice and program refinement. In particular, it is important to consider how well the course design reflects Glasser's components and contributes to meaningful learning experiences for teacher candidates that are transferable to their future career.

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Theoretical Framework Column: Sanford's Challenge and Support Theory

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A bright student walks into college with high hopes, faces their first real academic setback, and suddenly questions whether they really belong; we have all seen it happen for the freshmen most of the times. Nevitt Sanford's Challenge and Support theory offers a deceptively simple yet powerful explanation for why some students flourish in college while others struggle.

Since the 1960s, the landscape of higher education has evolved significantly, shifting from a focus on *in loco parentis* to a student-centered model that emphasizes holistic development. At the core of this shift remains the foundational work of Nevitt Sanford (1909-1996) continues to provide a robust framework for understanding how college environments influence student growth. This theory was originally formulated in his texts *The American College* (1962) and *Where Colleges Fail* (1967), where Sanford argued that genuine development occurs not merely through the acquisition of academic content, but through the dynamic interaction between the student's internal readiness and the external environment (Sanford, 1962; Sanford, 1967). This article explores the core mechanisms of Sanford's theory, its relevance in modern scholarship, and its practical application through a case study of a contemporary student.

Theoretical Framework

Sanford's theory rests on the premise that development is an adaptive response to the environment. He hypothesized that students are not passive vessels for knowledge but active agents who must be "ready" to learn. Readiness, in Sanford's view, is not strictly a matter of biological maturation but a psychological state that can be induced or inhibited by environmental factors (Sanford, 2017). Before a student can truly learn or change, they need to be psychologically prepared to do so. Moreover, a student may possess the intellectual capacity for complex ethical reasoning but may lack the readiness to engage with it until prompted by a specific environmental cue.

The primary mechanism for this development is the interplay between *challenge* and *support*. Sanford defined a challenge as any situation for which the individual does not currently possess the necessary skills, knowledge, or coping mechanisms to handle successfully. In the college context, challenges are multifaceted, ranging from the intellectual rigor of coursework to the psychosocial demands of living with diverse peers or as basic as, managing independent finances. Any sort of challenges creates a state of disequilibrium, or "dissonance," which compels the student to seek new ways of thinking or behaving to restore balance.

However, challenge alone is insufficient for growth. If a challenge is too intense and the student lacks adequate resources to cope, the result is not development but rather, regression. Sanford identified three negative outcomes of excessive challenge i) *retreat* (physically leaving the environment, such as dropping out), ii) *regression* (reverting to earlier, safer forms of behavior and dependency), or iii) *rigidification* (hardening one's existing views to shut out the challenging information). In order to prevent these outcomes, the environment must provide necessary *support*. Support acts as a buffer that reduces the overwhelming nature of the challenge, making it manageable without removing the stimulus for growth. This support can be external, such as advisors, peer mentors, and counseling services, or this can be internal, such as self-efficacy and resilience.

The goal of any educational environment, according to Sanford, is to maintain a balance of "optimal dissonance." This is the precise zone where the challenge is sufficient to disrupt the status quo and provoke new thinking, but also, the support is substantial enough to prevent the student from giving up. Furthermore, Sanford described the developmental process itself as a cycle of *differentiation* and *integration*. Think of differentiation as the moment when you realize your parents aren't omniscient, or that something you believed absolutely might have nuance to it. Your world gets messier and more complicated. On the other hand, integration is when you put the pieces back together into a new, more sophisticated version of yourself and both require the right mix of challenge and support (Patton et al., 2016).

Modern Applications of the Theory

While Sanford's original work focused on the traditional students of the mid-20th century, some of the contemporary scholars have successfully adapted his framework to address the complex needs of today's diverse student body:

Personalized Coaching and Retention

At McMaster University, a mid-sized research-intensive university, Kwan et al. (2021) carried out a study with approximately 30,000 students on the considerable stresses they generally face, particularly, during COVID-19. They have applied Sanford's theory to the evaluation of the "Archway" program, a personalized support initiative for first-year students, where, the researchers found that generic support mechanisms were often insufficient for students facing the specific *transition shock* of entering college and by calibrating the level of support (via intrusive coaching) to match the intensity of the challenge, the program successfully improved retention rates. This validates Sanford's theory that support must be dynamic and responsive to the specific challenge level rather than a static resource.

Appreciative Advising for At-Risk Students

Research on academic advising has also heavily leveraged Sanford's balance and a study involving students on academic warning utilized the "Appreciative Advising" model as a mechanism of support. The researchers conceptualized academic probation not merely as a failure but as a severe environmental challenge that exceeded the student's current coping mechanisms or skills. By affirmative advising interventions (high support), advisors were able to help students navigate the gap between their current academic standing and institutional expectations, effectively preventing the escape response that Sanford predicted (Bloom et al., 2008).

Study Abroad and Identity Development

Sanford's theory remains a cornerstone in international education. Recent white papers and scholarly analyses in the field of education abroad utilize the Challenge and Support model to design curriculum for students studying in foreign cultures. In these high-challenge environments, where linguistic and cultural barriers are intense, educators act as the primary support mechanism, guiding students through the differentiation of their cultural identities. Without intentional support such as, faculty mentoring, structured reflection, peer groups for processing culture shock, students in such high-challenge environments often resort to rigidification, by clinging to their home culture's stereotypes rather than embracing and integrating new cultural perspectives (Patton et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The most human insight in Sanford's theory is that development is not about being tough enough to handle anything; it is about the relationship between what we ask of students and what we provide them to meet those demands. The right balance between the two can bring about a massive transformation within a student.

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From the Archives

Adventures in the Gray Zone: Critical/Creative Thinking and How to Structure the Personal Meaning of Education

Ned Scott Laff

Research and Teaching in Developmental Education, Fall 1989

In 1989 we invited Ned Scott Laff to contribute to *Research in the Teaching of Developmental Education (RTDE)* as a guest columnist with a focus on critical thinking. Drawing on William Perry's developmental theory and Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Laff makes a compelling case for reconceptualizing the overlapping terrain between intellectual inquiry and personal development. He identifies what he terms the "Gray Zone", or the critical space where academic and student affairs converge through shared critical/creative thinking skills. By demonstrating the structural similarity between paradigm shifts in scientific communities and personal developmental transitions, Laff reveals that both processes involve the same fundamental activities: hypothesizing, interpreting, questioning, discovering, and evaluating.

As an example of what is possible when academic and student affairs work together, Laff proposes that advisors should function as "research directors" rather than schedule-builders, teaching students five essential critical thinking practices: raising conscious questions, identifying information gaps, probing assumptions, drawing inferences, and testing conclusions. These skills enable students to become self-directed learners who construct personal meaning from their educational experiences.

This article remains remarkably prescient in anticipating contemporary concerns about integrative learning, high-impact practices, and student success. Laff's vision of education as a personally orchestrated "assemblage of people, books, laboratories, and an environment of things, ideas, passions, and ideals" speaks directly to current debates about the purpose and practice of liberal education in an increasingly fragmented academic landscape.

FIRST

Journal Vision, Aims, and Scope

The Editorial Board of the FIRST has reframed our journal's vision, aims, and scope. As a board, we have made a commitment to revisit these statements biannually in order to ensure that our journal remains current within the field of higher education. These resources not only guide our editorial board in selecting and including articles in our journal. They also guide our authors in determining if the journal is a good space to showcase their scholarship. And they also guide you, as the reader, to alert us if the content we share is not in line with our purpose or does not help us reach our aspiration.

Vision Statement

Our journal is a space to explore those intersections of our field where developmental education, academic support, and student support programming overlap and can inform one another.

Aims and Scope

FIRST exists to serve the community of secondary and postsecondary professionals in sharing research and best practices in the intersectionality of developmental education, academic support, and student support programming for secondary and postsecondary education. It is particularly interested in promoting inclusive research that leverages sound research design practices and their application in diverse teaching and learning settings.

FIRST is sponsored and made possible by the New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA), a regional chapter of the International College Learning Center Association (ICLCA). We have a strong heritage of publishing a scholarly journal as *FIRST* is the evolution of *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* (RTDE). The current scope balances honoring the traditional definition of developmental education as a core foundation, while also seeking to keep up with current trends to expand what developmental education encompasses.

Published biannually (Fall and Spring issues) as an open-access journal, *FIRST* accepts articles from scholar-practitioners, graduate-level students in relevant fields, and undergraduate students working with faculty in the field. Specifically, *FIRST* seeks articles on topics such as, but not limited to:

- Theories and applications of teaching and learning in developmental education (both literacy and mathematics) and academic program courses.
- Social, emotional, and cognitive support and preparation programming, e.g. STEM specific strategies, PLTL, student services, and summer bridge programs.

- Engaging specific learner populations, e.g. dual credit, early college high school, and returning adult learners.
- Leveraging student success interventions, e.g. academic support, academic advisement, and tutoring.
- Exploring assessment practices, both student and programmatic, and their implications.
- Sharing innovations in research in teaching and learning, e.g., corequisites, embedded tutoring, technology inclusion, etc.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of acceptable topics. Articles on other topics may be considered; please direct any inquiries to FIRST editor [Dr. Nichole LaGrow](#) for more information.