

A Director of Field Experiences Has a Field Experience Down Under

by Mary C. Clement

Today's education students continue to report to their professors that field experiences and student teaching are the most valuable parts of their teacher-education programs. They say that working with "real" teachers and "real" students helps them learn the practical aspects of teaching.

As the director of field experiences at a college, I placed 800 teacher-education students in schools for field experiences in two years. I also placed 100 student teachers a year with their cooperating teachers. I took my job seriously and worked hard to make the best possible placements for my students, always striving to place students where they would see "best practices" in teaching.

Occasionally students would stop by my office to relate their concerns about going out to a school. Most of their questions were about the logistics of field experience, such as "How can I get to this school on time and still be on campus for my classes?" or "How do I work out teaching my three lessons to the regular teacher's class?" Sometimes the students came to my office midway through their field experiences and complained about teachers' lack of time to talk with them, or about feeling out of place in a school.

Although I never dismissed students' questions lightly, I generally answered their questions by reminding them that they had to plan carefully, juggle their schedules accordingly, and work to build relationships with the school and the teacher. I always ended by saying, "Remember that you are a guest in the schools, and the teacher's first priority is to teach the children in her class."

Those words rang in my own ears as I spent two weeks in an ultimate field experience—visiting schools in Auckland, New Zealand, one summer.

Why New Zealand?

When I was a little girl, my mother used to read a poem to me about "visiting faraway places with strange-sounding names." That simple phrase resounded in my mind when I was visiting schools named Mangare and Mauangawhau and sightseeing in places named Rotorua, Waimangu, and Waitapu. Faraway places with strange-sounding names indeed!

I went to New Zealand to study the schools—schools that for more than a decade received international acclaim for their work in the teaching of reading. The New Zealand schools have much to offer visitors, for this is where the whole-language movement began (Trussell-Cullen, 1996) and it is the birthplace of Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993). In addition to New Zealand's contributions to literacy, the country's national curriculum in all grades and subjects and its teacher-induction program both merit study. These factors alone make this nation a worthy site for educational study, but the added bonus is that visitors can study them in a richly multicultural environment. The Maori people of New Zealand have a strong voice in the educational system. Asians, Polynesians, South Africans, and eastern Europeans continue to immigrate to New Zealand to work and live, ensuring the diversity of many schools' student populations.

Getting There and Getting Started

Just as my college students worry about how to get to their field-experience placements, I too was concerned about flying seventeen hours to get to Auckland (five hours from Atlanta to Los Angeles and twelve from Los Angeles to Auckland).

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I arrived on a lovely winter day in July: the temperatures ranged from a low of 38 degrees to a high of 57 degrees Fahrenheit. Now what? I had researched the trip I purchased and knew that I would receive a thorough orientation to both the culture of New Zealand and the schools of Auckland (New Zealand's largest city) before I ever set foot in a school. The number-one rule of field experience is that a practicum student does not just wander into a school and start peering into classrooms uninvited.

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My orientation, provided by a noted author and retired teacher educator, proved invaluable. From him we learned that New Zealand's school year begins in January and ends in December. Of course, there are breaks, so the school year actually has four ten-week terms. Students begin primary school on the day of their fifth birthday or the first Monday of a new term closest to this day. The first three years of school are multi-age; stu-

dents can move up to the next year when they are developmentally and academically ready. Reading and literacy instruction begins on the first day a student arrives. New Zealand children know that they are "going to school to learn to read" (Trussell-Cullen, 1994).

Although it would be inaccurate to state that every school day in New Zealand has a certain schedule, many primary schools share a typical schedule. That schedule includes some physical activity for about fifteen minutes at the beginning of the day or soon thereafter. Students march around the school grounds or participate in group dancing, calisthenics, rope jumping, or other activities. From 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. students study language—oral reading, independent reading and writing, and skill activities. Then the entire school stops for a twenty-minute tea break. (This custom makes New Zealand, in my opinion, the last bastion of truly civilized society.) Children eat a quick snack brought from home and then play madly until tea is over.

After tea comes an hour and ten minutes for reading workshops, sustained silent reading, or some math work. Children and teachers both take lunch from 12 to 1. The afternoon subjects are taught around themes. Math, social studies, science, and art are usually taught in the afternoon. Music may be worked in by the regular classroom teacher to accompany a reading or a theme; sometimes several classes gather for a short music lesson with one classroom teacher who is talented in teaching music.

My orientation included "nuts and bolts" issues, too. I was instructed to pack a sack lunch and a snack for my tea break; the New Zealand schools have no cafeterias for students or faculty, so everyone brings a lunch. Faculty eat in the staff room and students eat outside near the playground in good weather and in their rooms in bad. (New Zealand children think little of eating and playing outside in chilly, damp, 40- or 50-degree weather.) Older students watch younger ones, and a teacher or two take turns watching all the schoolchildren so the rest of the teachers can enjoy the lunch hour. (Again, isn't this civilized?)

Into the Schools

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my first school. Would I be asked a question I didn't know the answer to? Would I be expected to help when I really wasn't sure of what to do for discipline or special education? Could I find the bathroom? Would I get in the way? Because my nametag had "Dr." on it, would the teachers I observed expect some kind of miracle answers from me, the visiting dignitary? My inner voice said, "Get a grip on reality." I made a mental note to provide more orientation to my college students and also to take their fears and anxieties more seriously back in my office.

My first day of field experience, like all my visits to New Zealand classrooms, went beautifully. For one thing, teachers in New Zealand are so accustomed to international visitors that at Auckland College of Education, "July and August are jokingly referred to as the 'American season'" (Trussell-Cullen, 1996, p. vii). New Zealand teachers seem to have broken down some of the barriers that isolate so many U.S. teachers in their rooms. Because team planning and open-door policies for new teachers are norms, the teachers also seem to be more welcoming and open to visitors than are many teachers in the United States. Discipline problems appear fewer—a possible factor in the teachers' ongoing acceptance of visitors. The teachers and schools who accepted the Americans in my study tour received honoraria, as they should. No teacher should have to do extra work with college students and faculty members merely out of kindness.

Participation versus Observation

Our study-tour organizer encouraged us to participate in the classrooms we visited. Sometimes it meant just lending a hand with tying a shoe or opening a lunch bag. One of the teachers in our group brought a lesson with her about American coins and gave each student in the room a penny as a souvenir. I had brought copies of a children's book about a famous local restaurant in my hometown, and I could then leave the books as gifts to the class library when I left. Time permitting, I could read the book to small or large groups in the class. While watching one of the teachers model writing for a class, it dawned upon me that I had a nice picture of my cat with me and I could show the picture and write a nice little paragraph for them to read. Although I didn't have the opportunity to teach the class of six-year-olds all about Zebulon the Wondercat, it could have turned into a viable lit-

tle lesson. Another teacher in our group (who also taught no lesson) made plans for the classrooms she observed to e-mail her class back in the United States the coming fall.

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Also vital to our understanding of the classrooms we visited were the debriefing sessions our tour organizer held after the visits.

Lessons to Be Learned from This (or Any) Field Experience

As with any valuable field experience, my experience in New Zealand went smoothly because of planning on the part of the tour organizer, the practicing classroom teachers, and me, the participant. Colleges of education cannot just send their students out to schools and expect miracles (i.e., that the students will learn how to teach by sitting in the rear of classrooms). Directors of field experience and student teaching who expect success need to develop productive in-service and orientation sessions for both students and cooperating teachers. Even the most excellent classroom teachers will not necessarily have the skills to mentor a college student toward becoming a second-grade teacher. With training, though, that veteran teacher can become a teacher educator and may even find the experience of working with college students rejuvenating. The lines of communication must be kept open with schools at all times, and colleges should offer something back to the schools, instead of just asking for placements all the time.

The first day that I was in a New Zealand school, our group organizer was energetically circulating in the halls of the school and in the staff room. He was available to help, to guide, and to answer questions. Field-experience students need specific guidelines about observing, journaling, and eventually teaching their lessons. They certainly need feedback from the teachers and time to talk with the teachers when the students are not in the classroom. In addition, there will always be questions the students should bring back to campus, and planning time for debriefing is a must.

What Did I Learn?

Many American teachers have traveled to New Zealand as “a kind of pilgrimage in pursuit of some instructional holy grail” (Trussell-Cullen, 1996, p. vii). As I photographed a rainbow in the Waiotapu National Park, I couldn’t help asking, “Have New Zealand educators found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?”

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The answers are yes, no, and maybe. New Zealand schools are open by American standards—open to teaming, open to visitors, and open to new ideas. No, their solutions will not always work somewhere else, because the best

schools anywhere in the world are built upon the needs of the populations they serve, and our populations and cultures are unique. Perhaps we can learn from the New Zealand schools and they can learn from us.

Above all else, I learned that field experiences make learning real and that we have to experience some things in order to understand them. It is also good to undertake field experiences after we have been in our own classrooms awhile. After twenty years of teaching, I learned a lot about teaching from observing and participating in New Zealand classrooms.

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