

# WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW CAN HURT THEM: PREPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR REAL WORLD STUDENTS

By

Tracy W. Smith  
Appalachian State University

Cogie Reed  
Parkway School, Watauga County Schools

Wanda Calvert  
Appalachian State University

Gayle Snyder  
Central Wilkes Middle School, Wilkes County Schools

Kellie Johnson  
Ashe Middle School, Ashe County

With contributions from Gayle Walden, Walter Johnson Middle School, and Bob Tatum,  
Avery County Middle School

*Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to:*

Tracy W. Smith, Appalachian State University, Department of Curriculum & Instruction,  
ASU Box 32047, Boone, North Carolina 28608. Phone: 828/262-2274. Email:  
[smithtw@appstate.edu](mailto:smithtw@appstate.edu)

Ms. Barrier nervously anticipated her students' arrival. As she stood in the doorway, she thought of the students and parents she met at open house last night. The students seemed eager to begin the new school year, and the parents willing to lend their support. Of course, not every student and parent attended open house; she felt a twinge of apprehension as she wondered about the students and parents she had not yet met. She pushed the thought aside...

Three months ago Ms. Barrier finished student teaching with glowing evaluations and endorsements from her university supervisor and cooperating teacher. They recommended her with enthusiasm and without reservation for this position. She had met all of the state requirements to be a highly qualified teacher. Her newly-framed diploma and teacher license were proudly displayed on the classroom wall. As she quickly scanned the classroom, she felt confident and prepared for her first year of teaching: handouts were

three-hole punched, numbered, color-coded, and stacked neatly for each class and subject; the room was immaculately decorated; and her lesson plans for the week were typed and placed deliberately on her podium. She was ready. But when her students arrived, she quickly realized they were not the students for whom she was prepared.

Every day in middle grades classrooms across North Carolina and the United States, students encounter teachers like Ms. Barrier who are often unaware, unprepared, and unsure about how to connect, understand, or effectively interact with real students. While their teacher preparation programs focused on *issues* of diversity, many of the *experiences* were either theoretical or contrived, failing to take into account the dynamic nature of multicultural classrooms, including their complex social, emotional, and academic dimensions. Novice teachers often fail to recognize the collective skill set needed to meet students' needs. By default, many of them imagine that their students will have similar experiences to those they had as adolescents. Drawing on personal experiences is certainly a powerful tool for relating to students, but this singular approach lacks the breadth and depth of understanding necessary for accommodating the diversity within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom.

When Francisco entered Ms. Barrier's room that first day, she was interacting with other students and barely noticed him. He didn't interrupt her or make eye contact, but went directly to a seat. Ms. Barrier noticed that he was very quiet all day, but aside from that, learned nothing about Francisco. How long would it take Ms. Barrier to know him well enough to make a difference in his life?

When would she learn that Francisco loves building model cars, playing soccer, and studying images of tanks and battleships? How long before she learned that his family moved from Guatemala last year? Will she realize that despite his struggles with English conversation and academic vocabulary, Francisco is a very motivated and hard-working student? When will she understand that using Spanish materials to reinforce his English studies is not helpful because he does not read in his native language? When will Ms. Barrier understand that she is responsible for collecting and contributing samples of Francisco's work to his official NCCLASS portfolio?

In spite of Francisco's learning challenges, his teachers must adhere to Department of Public Instruction policies and mandates that allow only two years in the NCCLASS portfolio evaluation process for all incoming English language learners. In the third year, these students are expected to take NC's End of Grade tests. The irony is that current research suggests that, even under perfect conditions where students interact using BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (playground language), most students require between 5-7 years to assimilate those skills into a means of acquiring academic language (CALP—Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). If the immersion into a new school is particularly traumatic because of cultural stressors, or individual shyness, this type of language acquisition could take in excess of ten years (Cummins, 2003). Francisco will be tested at the end of his third year in North Carolina's public schools, regardless. Though Ms. Barrier is not yet familiar with state requirements nor is she skilled in using the strategies needed or available to teach Francisco and others like him effectively, she enters her classroom on the first day committed to the success of all of her students.

## Description of Project

This vignette about Ms. Barrier, a hypothetical novice teacher, was written by faculty and partner teachers from Appalachian State University. In program exit and first-year teaching surveys, our middle grades teacher candidates and novice teachers have reported feeling committed to providing for the individual needs of each of their students. However, they also report feeling frustrated that they do not know *how* to achieve this laudable goal. In response to program feedback and perceived program needs, a group of middle grades teachers and university faculty have worked collaboratively to develop a strategy for helping pre-service teachers understand, consider, and respond effectively to the varying individual needs of young adolescent students. Our Middle Grades English Language Arts Professional Learning Community (PLC) is sponsored by a university-public school partnership committed to simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, 1988) and a shared responsibility for teacher preparation. This partnership provides teachers and university faculty unique opportunities for collaboration, inquiry, and professional development (Holmes Group, 1990). We meet once each month to discuss teaching dilemmas and consider strategies for addressing them. It is particularly appropriate that middle level teachers and teacher educators work collaboratively to develop effective approaches to preparing middle level teacher candidates for diverse students. *This We Believe* (2003) characterizes successful schools for young adolescents as being comprised of educators who value working with the age group and are prepared to do so. In addition, successful middle level schools provide an inviting, supportive, and safe environment and an adult advocate for every student. If these are the attributes of school culture that we value as a profession, these are the attributes we must foster in our middle grades teacher candidates so that they will be committed to providing multiple learning and teaching approaches that are responsive to student diversity.

In our teacher education program, we have been sensitive to feedback from upper level students, graduates, and supervising/master teachers suggesting that our curriculum must continually evolve to prepare candidates for contemporary classrooms and schools. To this end, the project of our PLC this year has focused on writing rich descriptions of young adolescent learners. These profiles are based on actual students in the classrooms of our teacher participants. As such, they provide authentic “cases” for our teacher candidates to examine in their instructional decision-making. While our university is located in a rural area, our graduates often teach in urban areas, and they report feeling unprepared for these contexts. Collectively, the profiles we have written are more representative of the diversity common in classrooms across the state.

While Francisco entered public school upon moving from Guatemala to North Carolina, Revicca transitioned to public school from a very different context:

Revicca entered public school for the first time this year, as an eighth grader. An avid artist, musician, and writer, she has a remarkably global skill set. In fact, she is learning to paint with oils, creating original compositions for the guitar, and is currently engrossed in drafting her first novel. By all accounts, she has above average aptitudes with the maturity to match. Unfortunately, Revicca’s school performance is not all shine and sparkle. Math was not a priority in her home school. Revicca has the mathematical mastery of an average 5<sup>th</sup> grader. To close the gap, she works from both extremes—8<sup>th</sup> grade skills by day in the classroom, 5<sup>th</sup> grade workbook by night at home.

Information about Francisco and Revicca included here came from the profiles written about them by their teachers, participants in our PLC. Each profile in the collection we have developed is written from two points of view, the teacher's and the student's. The teacher profiles are based on observations, data, and information typically available to classroom teachers. The teacher profiles include information related to race and ethnicity, family background, socioeconomic circumstances, interest and hobbies, observed strengths and weaknesses, required accommodations, test scores, attendance and disciplinary patterns, grades, motivation, and observed social interactions. For example, the teacher description of Katie includes the following:

Katie lives with her mother and older sister. Her mother does not sign report cards or show up for parent conferences (even when rescheduled 2 times), but the mother will call and blame the teachers for any failing grades because they "never return her calls" and "don't tell her anything."

Katie suffers from asthma. She is very shy and would rather fail than do an oral book report. She has a small group of good friends and is kind to others. She likes to draw.

Katie has very good reading comprehension, but she is unmotivated. She does almost no homework. She lies to the teachers and says her work is at home. She lies to her mother by saying she turned in assignments and the teachers "lost them."

Katie misses almost 7 days per quarter and does not ask for make up assignments. She scrapes by with C's and D's but has the ability to make A's.

In contrast, the student profiles were written by the teacher from the student's perspective. In these profiles, the teacher tried to capture the student's perceptions of these same characteristics. So, Katie's profile from her "own" perspective might read more like this:

I really like school. My teachers may not know that. They probably think that since I miss so much school I must hate it. That's not why I miss school, though. I have terrible trouble with asthma and sometimes I just can't get enough breath to keep me going. After a night of wheezing and coughing, I just don't want to go to school.

I can always talk my mom into letting me stay home. She dropped out of school and she thinks I will do the same thing. She's just waiting for me to fail. Any time I make a bad grade she yells at me and tells me she knows how lazy I am and how sneaky I am. Maybe I would show her my progress reports and report cards if she didn't always tell me how awful I am. I'm tired of fighting with her. Sometimes I just don't do my homework to make her mad. I know that's stupid, but I do it any way.

The two perspectives of Katie show very different views of her as a student. In developing the teacher profile, our PLC teacher participant chose to depict her team teachers' "first impression" of Katie as unmotivated and lazy. The profile for our project was not written until January. After getting to know Katie, talking to her teacher's from last

year, and interacting with her mother, the PLC member had a better view of the reasons behind Katie's attendance issues and lack of motivation:

Writing this profile of Katie forced me to look more closely at the 'real' Katie. I didn't realize that school was a refuge for Katie from the frustrations/pressures at home until I had some interaction with her mother. I do not sit down and create profiles of all my students, but I now realize that it is a great exercise to compel teachers to see their students from a different perspective and hopefully find a way to reach the child.

## **Method**

Creating student profiles began with the notion that our classes are not made up of students with homogenous personalities and capabilities. Instead, our group focused on the reality that each student embodies an enormous set of cultural and individual factors that determine their abilities as a member of our classes. We acknowledged that every student is capable of learning, but that the only thing *normal* about our students is the fact that each is equally unique academically and personally; in addition, each student has qualities that may be considered extreme in nature. Whether it is a family situation, or a particular gift, a deficit, an obstacle at home, social interactions—each student must be treated with the same qualities of understanding and care despite the complexities and challenges of his or her background. Pre-service teachers need strong examples of just this brand of disposition as they prepare to be a part of a professional community. They will be asked to draw conclusions about their students in the future, but these conclusions and subsequent actions must reflect the complexity of each child if our system is to meet students' needs thoroughly and compassionately. With these qualities in mind, our profiles from a teacher's perspective were created.

One of our teacher participants described his process for developing the student narratives as follows:

As I began to create each student narrative, I started with one major goal—to honorably represent each child by using the tone and voice that I heard as I recalled the conversations that lead to each narrative. I wanted to catch those brilliant sparks of excitement, as well as those darker elements of desperation, or heartbreak. These are my children's stories as they were related to me. "Are they accurate?" one may ask (as I have as well). I knew that I had met my goal when I heard the student, that I renamed Revicca, repeat the words that I wrote two weeks prior—"I love the people around me, and I try to be kind to everyone. I know people are beautiful, so I love them all just the same." These words also carry a reminder for every teacher. We have a responsibility to believe in every child that enters our classroom. To be interested enough to find what it is about them that is worth embracing.

## **Implications**

In our middle grades program, we have already begun to use these profiles to enhance our candidates' preparation. In our methods courses, we are beginning to distribute

these profiles so that candidates can incorporate these students' interests, strengths, and needs into their instructional planning. Rather than asking them to write about general ideas for differentiating instruction in their lessons, we are asking them to consider the needs of particular students (e.g., Revicca, Francisco, Katie) as they plan. This is already proving to be a powerful experience for them. Eventually, as we continue developing profiles, we will have a class set of them. We are also investigating the creation of a virtual class of students upon whom our students can base instructional decisions.

Our hope is that having teacher candidates consider these profiles will influence their perspective on instructional planning. For survival, it seems that teacher candidates often focus on what they will *do* each day. One goal we have is to help them look outward to consider the needs and complexities of their students as they plan instruction. In our teacher preparation program, we will use profiles like Francisco's, Revicca's, and Katie's to help our candidates develop habits of mind to be proactive (not merely reactive) in their planning for meeting students' needs.

Harry and Klinger (2007) found that teachers tend to interpret learner differences as deficiencies and that this disposition predisposes them to see students as limited by their culture. They further question the response of schools to students whose early home and community experiences have not prepared them for schooling:

Do the schools then provide the students with adequate and appropriate opportunities to learn? Does instruction begin where the students are? Does it move at a pace that enables them to become accustomed to the new norms and expectations? Are the students made to feel that the school values the knowledge they bring from their homes and communities? Do teachers build on these 'funds of knowledge,' or do they see only deficits in students? (p. 20)

One of our goals in this process has been to find an authentic way to equip teacher candidates to respond to the needs and challenges (not deficiencies) of students. Further, we hope to give them experiences that will bolster their confidence to act as change agents and champions for students when they begin their teaching careers.

As we worked together on these profiles, exchanging ideas and adding details, we realized that the outcome had become more than we expected. Our original intent was to help teacher candidates by providing authentic descriptions of young adolescents we teach each day. We hoped to foster advocacy in these teachers. What we found was that *our* commitment to advocacy was also renewed – and our sharing of student characteristics and ideas grew into more ideas and support for both our middle school students and our teacher candidates.

We believe student profile writing might be a promising practice for beginning teachers (BTs) as well. In their new role as career teachers, many novices feel overwhelmed and even isolated by the student diversity and needs in their classrooms. Writing profiles based on facts, observations, data, and inquiry might help them more carefully examine the complexity of their students. With a skillful BT mentor/facilitator who provides support, BTs would be more likely to develop positive perceptions of their students rather than a deficiency mentality toward them. Since our profiles were created by several individuals, the tone and demeanor change from profile to profile. With such variety, a BT would be able to draw upon these models as they engage in professional conversations with mentors, principals, and family members of each child. In individual districts and schools, collections

of profiles could be used with BTs. Another possible use of this approach would be to have BTs write profiles of students early in the year and then revisit those profiles later in the year, adding details that they have learned about the students. This would give them an opportunity to see their own professional growth over time. In a very practical sense, using the format we developed (or a similar format reflective of teacher, school, or district needs) would provide teachers a basis on which to plan instruction, document progress, collaborate with colleagues, and provide feedback to students and their families.

Ms. Barrier will gain a better understanding of her students over their time together. The question, though, is whether her students can afford to bear the weight of her personal learning curve. Teaching and learning standards continue to increase at state and national levels. Students need knowledge and skills to be successful and competitive in a global community. No student is exempt from high expectations; therefore, every teacher must be ready to help every student. Students cannot afford to wait while their teachers acquire on-the-job training. Prior to field experiences, profiles like the ones described here can prepare teacher candidates for the complexity and diversity of real students. Obviously, no model will perfectly mimic every teacher's experience. Instead, what this model offers is an opportunity for young professionals to engage in conversations (and internal dialogue) about students – their strengths, their challenges, their needs, and their futures. When teachers judge less and inquire more, they are able to tap into a vibrant source of empathy, compassion, and motivation within themselves. Imagine what the Ms. Barriers can orchestrate on their students' behalf once they are able to understand and appreciate them genuinely and deeply.

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## **About the Authors**

**Tracy W. Smith, Ph.D.** has served as a middle and high school teacher, central office administrator, and educational consultant. Currently, she is an associate professor and undergraduate middle grades program coordinator at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

**Cogie Reed** is an eighth grade Language Arts teacher at Parkway School in Boone, North Carolina. He has served as a Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) trainer and beginning teacher mentor for Watauga County Schools; he continues to represent his county colleagues as a member of the coordinating council for a regional professional learning community and partnership with Appalachian State University.

**Wanda Leah Calvert, Ph.D.** has served as a middle school teacher, clinical faculty member, and Professional Development Schools Coordinator. Currently, she is an assistant professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

**Gayle Snyder** has been and junior high and middle school Language Arts/English teacher for 32 years. After serving/working in various places, she has been in North Carolina and at Woodward and Central Wilkes Middle School for the past 9 years. She has her Masters of Science in English degree.

**Kellie Johnson** has been a middle school teacher for eighteen years, teaching in Cabarrus and Ashe counties. Currently, she is teaching eighth grade Language Arts and Social Studies at Ashe County Middle School in Warrensville, North Carolina.