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TEACHER CANDIDATES LEARN TO CREATE TEACHER WEBSITES TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH STUDENT, PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

by Jennifer Laffier, Meaghan Clarke and Alanna Houston

Abstract

'Theory to practice' based learning activities are important for teachers in training. Therefore, as part of a course in a Bachelor of Education program in Ontario, Canada teacher candidates learned how to create effective teacher websites to promote the healthy development of students as well as engage students, parents, and the community in the learning environment. Student, parent, and community engagement are considered key elements of student success. This learning activity and how teacher candidates developed effective websites based on theories of healthy development and student success were explored in this paper. First, the research related to teacher websites is reviewed. Next, two case studies are presented to illustrate how components of teacher websites can engage students, their parents and the community. The case illustrations also demonstrated how educational and child development theories can be transferred to 'practice' for teacher candidates in their program of studies. Finally, recommendations for including teacher websites into teacher training programs and ways to engage students and parents in websites are included.

Introduction

Unraveling the elements of student success is often a goal for researchers and educators. One known element of student success is *engagement*, that includes student, parental and community engagement. Students thrive when they feel supported and engaged in their learning process (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2004). Additionally, involving parents and families is one of the most important ways to improve schools and thus help students succeed; specifically when parents have the opportunity to be involved in their child's learning process (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). Although often overlooked, community involvement can support student success. Partnerships can be developed with local agencies or community members to increase resource support. Community members could also be involved in fundraising efforts, policy development, and school programming (Piper, 2012). Schools, parents, and

community members should have a common goal pertaining to children: to contribute to their healthy and successful development. Thus, these groups should become allies within all communities (Ryan & Cooper, 2007).

One way to increase student, parent and community involvement is through teacher websites. The internet has been described by teacher educators as a tool that can have benefits for both teachers and students (Friedman, 2006). Teacher websites act as a virtual portal to the real classroom; supporting student learning by including course outlines, tutorial videos, or other supplementary materials (Holcomb, Castek, & Johnson, 2007). In addition, classroom websites can encourage parental involvement by increasing awareness of course expectations, school functions, and student homework. This allows the parent(s) or guardians to know how they can support their child's learning and school experience. Teacher websites can also engage students and parents within the larger community (Piper, 2012). Having community resources on the webpage can link parents, students, schools, and community agencies together.

Since such evidence exists to support the use of teacher websites, teacher candidates in a Bachelor of Education program in an Ontario university learned to create teacher websites as part of their '*Adolescent Development and Learning*' course. Pedagogical practices in pre-service teacher education programs that allowed for the interplay of theory and practice contributed positively to teacher candidate learning. Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) suggested that, "Teachers benefit from participating in the culture of teaching by working with the materials and tools of teaching practice and by examining teaching plans and student learning while immersed in theory about learning, development, and subject matter" (p. 122). Therefore, students were asked to create teacher websites in their course; the assignment sought to nudge students into a practical yet "informed by theory" learning exercise where they would apply theories of learning, motivation, and human development to building an effective teacher website. The ways in which they designed their websites and what information they included would reflect this theoretical knowledge, thus reflecting best practice ideas. One key area of student success studied by teacher candidates was the importance of a sense of community and engagement. This paper reviewed this learning activity and provided examples of teacher websites to illustrate how theory of practice was accomplished as well as provide examples of ways in which teacher websites can enhance student, parent and community engagement.

Literature Review

In order to explore how teacher websites can enhance student, parent, and community involvement and how these websites can be created by teachers, a literature review was performed on the following topics: 1) elements of student success, 2) parental and community engagement, and 3) teacher websites. The journals searched were *Journal of Educational Research*, *New England Reading Association Journal*, *Journal of Technology & Teacher Education*, *Community College Journal of Research and*

Practice, British Journal of Educational Technology, Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, School Community Journal, and the Journal of Adolescence. The relationship between academic success and student, parent, and community involvement is first presented. Following, is a review of the current use of school based websites; specifically the benefits, problems, and recommendations for the use of teacher websites.

The Importance of Engagement

Student engagement. Student engagement in the learning process is essential for academic success. Students need to be actively engaged in what they are learning in order to understand the value in their education (Auger & Rich, 2006). Additionally, students need to feel a sense of community from their learning environment, a place where they will be supported and valued. In the document, *Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school* published by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (Ferguson et al., 2005), a disconnection from the school community was listed as one of the top reasons for students to drop out of high school. This disconnect could be caused by a negative school climate, passive instructional strategies, disregard for student learning styles, or lack of support for students with disabilities (Ferguson et al., 2005). Recommendations were provided to increase students' sense of community and engagement with school: meeting individual student needs, developing innovative, interactive and personalized instructional strategies, building links with the community, considering the fit between school structure and adolescent development, providing opportunities for decision making, involving parents, and providing students with information, services, and opportunities for participation (Ferguson et al., 2005). If students feel a sense of community in the classroom, they can learn more effectively. Students' learning process is enhanced when they feel safe, supported, and valued because they feel less stress; this is important for brain functioning and learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Reducing stress for students should be a primary goal of all classroom teachers; when students know what to expect, trust the people they are with, and feel that they have the proper supports for their learning, they will be better equipped to learn (Auger & Rich, 2006). In addition, when students feel a sense of community, they can develop social skills and a sense of identity, both of which are important for development. In a cohesive classroom, students can practice communication skills with others; they have opportunities to negotiate, mediate, and problem solve. Students would also have opportunities to develop their sense of identity; they could bounce ideas of others and try out different roles (Auger & Rich, 2006).

Community engagement. Community involvement is an important factor for school success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). A student's community can be part of his or her support network to enhance their chances for academic success. Individuals and organizations in the community can offer encouragement, resources, and support for students (Sanders, 2006). For example, community organizations can offer academic

support such as tutoring or training sessions. There are also community organizations that can offer mental health and developmental support such as counseling or after school programs for physical fitness or social skills. Having these after school activities can increase the child's chances for academic success since research shows that mental health is important for learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Community members could also be involved in fundraising efforts, policy development, and school programming (Piper, 2012). Several case studies of elementary and high schools efforts to involve the community demonstrated successful methods: student tutoring and mentorship programs, advertising for the school, sponsorship of school teams, student and family incentives at school events, and internships and community service opportunities (Sanders, 2006). Moreover, the author (Sanders, 2006) suggested that students, who understand that the surrounding community provides valuable support, were more likely to return following graduation and add to the community.

Parent engagement. Parent engagement is also important for student success. By involving parents and families into the school community, a school's climate can be improved (Mapp, 2003). If parents have opportunities to be involved in their child's learning process throughout the school year, they will increase their interactions with their child at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the elementary grades, and rate the teachers as better teachers overall (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). The benefits of parental involvement for students included not only higher grade point averages and scores on standardized tests but enrollment in more challenging academic programs, and more classes passed or credits earned (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents can be supportive and engaged in their child's schooling when two-way communication with teachers is established (Unal & Unal, 2010). When parents communicate with teachers and participate in school activities, they gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of their child at school and will be better prepared to help their child at home (Holcomb et al., 2007). Moreover, good parent-teacher collaboration leads students to receive consistent messages from home and school about the importance of education, which positively influences their learning and social development (Li, Price, & Fu, 2011). Schools use a variety of strategies to communicate with families. Traditionally, schools have sent student report cards, school newsletters, or organize events for the entire family or parents. A more modern method to enhance parent and community engagement for student success was the creation and use of teacher websites (Friedman, 2006; Hill, Tucker, & Hannon, 2010; Holcomb et al., 2007).

Teacher websites

As the percentage of youth using the internet increased the pressure on teachers to create websites also increased (Janicki & Chandler-Olcott, 2012). Teacher websites can provide a portal into the real classroom for both students and parents. Students and parents can access course resources such as course outlines, videos, handouts, notes, assignments, school year calendars, and teacher contact information. Improving home-

school communication was identified as a primary way to enhance trust for the parents or family and having a course website can do just that (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Benefits of teacher websites. There are a number of noted benefits of course websites in the literature. Piper (2012) reported the following ways teacher websites can enhance parental or community involvement (1) increasing awareness through communication, (2) recruiting volunteers, (3) supporting student learning and progress, (4) including parents in decision making processes, and (5) collaborating with the community. Ultimately, parents can stay informed of their child's academic progress and school functions. Grunwald Associates (Mageau & DeBoor, 2000) found that more than 60% of families wanted to be able to communicate online with teachers (p. 82). Information about homework, grades, and upcoming events let parents feel connected. It is important that there is communication throughout the school year between parents and teachers. Researchers (Hill et al., 2010; Umit & Akbayin, 2012) proposed the inclusion of personal teacher information such as biographies, photo, hobbies and interests, and contact information. If this was included for parents they would have a better sense of who the teachers were, their qualifications, and how to contact them; and overall a better sense of security about their children's school experiences.

A class website can increase a teacher's ability to rapidly and accurately communicate current and up-to-date information such as modifying a class schedule, announcing a trip, or posting important reminders. Teachers may need parent volunteers and websites can get information and updates about opportunities to volunteer out quickly. Websites are available 24 hours a day and can be accessed in the time and place most convenient to students and parents, including after school or late at night (Witt, 2003). This access to information may reduce the need for students to contact the teacher and be more prepared, as well as reduce time the teacher has to spend in class asking questions (Witt, 2003).

Students with learning disabilities (LD) and their parents may find extra benefits from classroom websites. Heiman and Shemesh (2003) investigated the patterns of course website use of 964 students with and without learning disabilities studying in higher education. They found that students with LD logged into the website more frequently, entered the forum more often, and left significantly more messages in the discussion than the students without learning disabilities. Including a section for missed homework and the use of video tutorials addresses student absenteeism, which is common when students with learning exceptionalities or those experiencing health or mental illness issues (Fulton, 2012).

Teacher websites can identify and integrate community resources and services to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Community resources for learning supports, field trips, mental health, or afterschool programs can be described online. Piper (2012) suggested the inclusion of a counseling section on classroom websites to provide information about contacts for parent support as well as links to local support networks. Community organizations such as boys and girls clubs, arts programs, and team sports can coordinate with the school

and advertise their services on the sites so students and parents are aware of these opportunities.

Witt (2003) reported that teacher websites may be perceived by students to be a contemporary methodology and an appealing instruction style, thus perceiving their teachers as more competent or credible. This may apply to parents' perceptions of teachers as well. Teachers who develop classroom websites demonstrated a commitment to preparing students for participation in a growing technologically-literate world (Unal & Unal, 2010).

Problems with teacher websites. There are several problems or obstacles to creating or using teacher websites noted in the literature including teachers' beliefs, accessibility, maintenance issues, time factors, and lack of information. Teachers' own beliefs and attitudes about the relevance of technology to students' learning were perceived as having the biggest impact on their success (Friedman, 2006). Teachers indicated that other internal factors (e.g., passion for technology, having a problem-solving mentality) and support from others (administrators and personal learning networks) played key roles in shaping their practices.

Several studies indicated that teachers were failing to maintain their websites for reasons including lack of technological knowledge (Hill et al., 2010), regular system breakdowns and internet failures (Li et al., 2011; Witt, 2003), cost of required software (Friedman, 2006), the perception that they are not being used by students or parents (Friedman, 2006; Hill et al., 2010), or the time commitment (Witt, 2003). Witt (2003) found that 77% of teachers had built the websites themselves spending an average of 13.6 hours building them (p. 432). In addition, 87% of teachers updated the websites themselves, spending an average of 10.6 hours per semester on maintenance (p. 432). The majority of middle school and high school class websites were organized with few interactive elements; leading to less use of the website by students (Holcomb et al., 2007). Unfortunately, teachers viewed this as a lack of interest in the website and failed to see why they should spend additional time to maintain their pages. In a study conducted by Friedman (2006), teachers reported a large disparity in the percentage of their students that had internet access at home and this had a profound effect on whether teachers used their websites. Many teachers believed that the majority of parents would not be able to access their site, thereby mitigating any potential communication benefit that it might hold.

There may also be a lack of information on teacher websites. Hill et al. (2010) examined over 50 classroom websites and found that only 60% listed teachers' email addresses and only 44% included a telephone number (p. 117). This disconnect could ultimately lead to decreased parent engagement and involvement in the class and school, which could negatively affect student performance.

Current literature supported the idea of teacher created websites for student, parent, and community involvement; however, adequate guidelines for determining formal content of a teacher website were missing or infrequent (Unal, 2008). Teachers may be

more likely to have a classroom website if they felt that it was not an obligation; it could be used as a tool to support student success. Research conducted by Janicki and Chandler-Olcott (2012) indicated that professional development that focused on website creation and maintenance and potential benefits to students, parents, and teachers did make a difference in teachers' commitment to creating classroom websites. Additionally the use of checklists could help teachers design and maintain their websites in an effective manner. A checklist of suggestions could be used to evaluate content and design features that should be included, with categories such as content, control, consistency, and corroboration (Hill et al., 2010; Holcomb et al., 2007).

It has been suggested in the literature that there is a need for teacher training on website creation and maintenance (Unal & Unal, 2010) and Bachelor of Education programs may be the ideal place for future teachers to learn these skills. The barriers preventing teachers from using classroom websites can be addressed in a teacher education program: a) confidence in technological skills, b) beliefs about the value of technology in student learning, c) time, and d) knowledge of design principles (Fulton, 2012; Janicki & Chandler-Olcott, 2012; Piper, 2012; Unal & Unal, 2010; Witt, 2003). Teacher candidates can learn the value of technology in the lives of children and adolescents as well as effective use of technology in the classroom. Courses focused on educational software, programming and coding, and interactive technology can give teacher candidates added skills. While enrolled in a B.Ed. program teacher candidates can also learn relevant theories and research related to what children need for healthy development, motivation, learning, and success. This knowledge can be transferred, in a research to practice model, to the development of an evidence-based and practical website. Teacher candidates can learn what components of a website are effective for student learning and development. Creating these websites in advance gives teacher candidates an opportunity to receive feedback from course instructors and colleagues and thus opportunities to restructure their sites if needed. Students are taught the importance of reflective practice which includes soliciting feedback on their websites from future students and parents to know what is working or not working.

Methodology

In order to illustrate a *theory to practice* learning assignment regarding engagement that is of value to teacher candidates two case studies are presented. These are mock classroom websites created by teacher candidates (TC) in a one year Bachelor of Education program in an Ontario University (both co-authors of this paper). As a requirement of their course titled '*Adolescent Development and Learning*' each TC had to create a teacher website that enhanced the healthy development and academic achievement of students. TCs learned that effective teaching should involve educating the *whole child*; knowing who the student is from a personal, family, cultural, and community perspective. TCs had to consider theories about healthy development and learning in order to design their website. For example, theories related to learning styles, memory, learning processes, community building, engagement, active learning,

developmental tasks of children, and adolescents could all be applied when considering what to put on a site or how to design a website. An overriding theme throughout the course was the importance of student engagement and community building; theories and practical tools of how to do this were explored in the course. This *theory to practice* model for the assignment provided an evidence based structure; thus making this a useful and practical tool for future use.

Each website was individually presented with screen shots of various features and followed by a) description of the feature, b) explanation of how it connects to developmental or learning theories from the course, c) explanations of how that feature could enhance student, parent, or community involvement, and d) recommendations for any additions or changes to the feature based on the literature review.

Case Study 1

This website was created by a female teacher candidate in the Intermediate/Senior stream of the teacher education program. The website is specifically designed for students in high school and in a health and physical education program. (See Feature 1, Teacher Information)

The About Me page of the website provides personal information about the TC including such items as education, hobbies, teacher experiences, and teaching philosophies. The purpose of the page was to allow students and parents the opportunity to get to know the teacher on a personal level. This could allow a better relationship between teacher, parents, and students. Developing trusting relationships between teachers and students in schools everywhere is a challenging task that is essential to maintaining an effective learning environment (Ennis & McCauley, 2002). Teacher information was identified as an important component of a class based website (Janicki & Chandler-Olcott, 2012). There are many benefits of including teacher information such as biographies, hobbies, and interests to the websites (Umit & Akbayin, 2012). Research by Wakefield, Wakefield, Baker, and Wang (2011) suggested students are more likely to use and feel a personal connection to websites that contain helpfulness, friendliness, and familiarity. A sense of friendliness and familiarity can be achieved on teacher websites by the adding personal information about the teacher that a student may not otherwise know. This helps build trust and rapport between the students, parents and teachers. Trust between parents and teachers are a vital element in building and maintaining the family-school relationship (Adams & Christenson, 2000). (See Feature 2, Involvement)

The Get Involved page shows students and parents what is offered at the school and how they can be involved in the school and community. Research suggested that when parents are involved in their child's learning there are higher grade point averages and scores on standardized tests, enrollment in more challenging academic programs, and more classes passed or credits earned by students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents can learn what is going on in the school and can volunteer for various activities, events,

and fundraisers happening at the school. They can also become aware of volunteer positions their child can sign up for at school or what clubs are available for them to join. Parents may have ideas for clubs, volunteer positions, and include their child in the decision making process. Community connections through clubs and activities can be formed. For example, art centers or YMCA programs may be offered at the school. In the parent link, parents can find ideas and suggestions for helping their child study and prepare for school; this supports student learning and progress. Most importantly children need to feel connected to society and have opportunities for social interaction, to develop a sense of initiative and responsibility (Auger & Rich, 2006). Adolescence is a complex stage, a time when young people take on new responsibilities and experiment with independence. They search for identify, learn to apply values acquired in early childhood, and develop skills that will help them become caring and responsible adults. When adolescents are supported and encouraged by caring adults, they thrive in unimaginable ways, becoming resourceful and contributing members of families and communities (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2002). Thus, by being involved in school clubs and events, students are able to grow as individuals and shape their characteristics. (See Feature 3, Study Habits)

Improved study habits lead to increased academic effectiveness (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). This page offers tips for studying to both students and parents. Parents and students can work together to develop study habits that will benefit the student learner in the classroom and at home. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2012) when parents and families have the opportunity to be involved in their own child's learning process this increases student success in schools. The study tips posted directly reflect theories of learning, specifically memory and information processing (Auger & Rich, 2006). Knowledge of these topics allows the TC to post effective information to help students. Although not listed on this website, the TC creator identified a note should be provided on the webpage that these study tips do not apply to all students. This consideration comes from awareness of theories of learning styles and practices of special education in schools (Auger & Rich, 2006). Not all students learn the same and therefore different teaching strategies should be used with students. (See Feature 4, Questions/Comments/Contact Me)

The questions/comments section of the website allows students or parents to send feedback or ask questions about the class. Hill et al. (2010) recommended that the school name, address, phone number, and teacher contact information should be included for parents to contact the teacher. All of this information was provided in this link, except for the teacher's phone number. It was decided by the TC creator that since students could access this link it would not be professional to provide a home or personal phone number. Although not identified this may be the reason, in a study by Hill et al. (2010), why only 44% of 50 classroom websites listed a phone number (p. 117). In this website any submissions were designed to go directly to the teacher, not the school as a whole; this would provide more direct communication. As identified by Grunwald Associates (Mageau & DeBoor, 2000), 64% of all parents want to be able to communicate online with teachers (p. 82). Parents are supportive and engaged in their child's schooling when two-way communication with teachers is established (Unal &

Unal, 2010). Witt (2003) identified that parents were more likely to call the school, or wait until parent teacher interviews than visit the teacher website for questions and information. This disconnect could ultimately lead to decreased parent engagement and involvement in the class and school, which could negatively affect student performance.

Case study 2

This website was created by a female teacher candidate in the Intermediate/ Senior stream of the teacher education program. The website is specifically designed for students in high school and for students in a biology program. (See Feature 2a, Activist Learning Project)

Activist learning is a way of learning the curriculum plus life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and empathy by engaging in a project that causes social change (The Freechild Project, 2010). According to Au, Bigelow, and Karp (2007), curriculum and classroom practice must be critical and culturally sensitive. This activist project developed such skills by introducing the topic of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and the associated health concerns to people. Students researched GMOs and the opposing views of the associated biological / health concerns. Then they presented the information in the form of a mini-summit to educate parents and members of the community on the issue of GMOs. Later they posted the information on the website for future reference for parents and the community as indicated on this webpage. There was a short video of GMOs and a description of the project that students and family members could view. This connected what the students were learning back to the community and parents. Parents could get involved in the project themselves or make suggestions for new activist projects. Engaging parents in the project may have helped develop healthy relationships between youth and parents; it could be a common interest and passion for them. In addition, the millennial generation (current students) are very strongly influenced by family and peers. Thus, if parents are involved in political and civic activity the students' motivation may increase as well (Au et al., 2007). (See Feature 2b, Mental Health Awareness & Prevention)

This page on the teacher website listed mental health resources in the community that students or parents could go to or contact for help. Information on mental health for both students and parents is a helpful tool on teacher websites (Piper, 2012). Students experiencing mental health issues are a reality for teachers today; the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013) state, "up to 70% of young adults living with mental health problems report that the symptoms started in childhood" (p. 26). This page outlined supports for students experiencing bullying, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Contact information for community mental health resources, helpful videos, and other information was provided on this page. For example, this TC posted a video to help students with stress that was developed by a student advocating for mental health awareness. A student created video was chosen to be more relatable to students and

increased their motivation to follow the tips (Lavoie, 2008). Having community mental health resources can link families and students to the community. This will also build a relationship between community partners and schools.

Discussion

These two case studies of teacher websites provided examples of how a *theory to practice* model can be implemented in a classroom assignment for teacher candidates. Theories learned in class can be transferred to personal reflection questions such as 'so what does this mean for my teaching practice?' Validating the reasons why content is included on a site or why a site is designed a particular way is beneficial not only for the teacher but the school, parents, and students. This approach demonstrated reflective and evidence based practice; a skill that should be present in all teachers. Furthermore, this approach provided evidence that what is being taught or how something is being communicated to a student is based upon best practice; thus supporting the student's learning journey.

Several recommendations can be made from the literature review and these sample teacher websites regarding teacher websites and teacher training. Although the current literature supported the idea of teacher created websites there are limited adequate guidelines for determining formal content of a teacher website (Unal, 2008). Each website should be tailored towards the specific course, grade level, or cultural or community demographics. Teachers should obtain feedback on the website from parents and student to know (a) how they are using the website, (b) what components they think are useful, and (c) what recommendations they have for the website. In particular, teacher candidates should receive feedback from students and parents once they begin teaching to see if revisions are necessary for their website. Feedback on individual components of the site is important to understand which ones are more useful than others; website design should be based on this feedback and current research. Unfortunately, there was limited research on the effectiveness of individual components of teacher websites. For example, there was little research on the impact of teachers' personal information on websites (Umit & Akbayin, 2012). Researchers should review if parents and students find this information helpful for relationship building.

The creation of teacher websites in teacher education programs can be an effective and useful assignment. Teacher candidates were learning and practicing the skills necessary to develop effective classroom websites such as technology design (website design, video creations), theories of learning, healthy development, and aspects for student success. Research and theory to practice was a cornerstone of many teacher education programs. The websites will be based on the current research and theories they are learning in class. For example, teacher candidates learned principles of learning, healthy human development, social development that involved community and parent relationships, theories of motivation, and student success; this knowledge could be integrated into designing an effective website. Janicki and Chandler-Olcott (2012)

indicated that professional development that focused on website creation and benefits to students, parents, and teachers made a difference in teachers' commitment to creating classroom websites. This professional development could be part of initial teacher education programs.

Future research studies should investigate the feedback from parents, teachers, and students on the design, use, and effectiveness of teacher websites. Research with teacher candidates could investigate if their websites are actually used once they start teaching.