Many pieces of the puzzle:
A collaborative process of becoming a teacher

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ABSTRACT

This report is on an innovative model of student teaching in elementary education that emphasizes collaboration among different levels of part-time student teachers, full-time student teachers, mentor teachers, principals and university supervisors. The CORE (Collaborations for Renewal of Education) model of student teaching has a strong focus on peer coaching and peer observation. Student teachers learn not only through interactions with mentor teachers, university faculty, administration, parents and the community, but also from interactions with each other and through introspection and reflection. After description and discussion of the CORE model, preliminary research of the model is discussed. In one semester of student teaching in a school with a highly diverse student population, data was collected on participants as they collaborated with peers, mentor teachers, and university faculty in the CORE model. Through participant observation, interviews, and examination of artifacts, common themes and concerns were identified that focused on collaboration, English learners, and classroom management.

Keywords: teacher education, collaboration, student teaching, peer coaching, peer observation

INTRODUCTION

This report is on an innovative model of student teaching in elementary education that emphasizes collaboration among different members of the field-based component in teacher preparation programs--student teachers, mentor teachers, administrators and university faculty. This program was purposefully entitled the CORE (Collaborations for Renewal of Education) model of student teaching.

The collaboration in the CORE program is among part-time student teachers, full-time student teachers, mentor teachers, principals and university supervisors. Student teachers work in collaborative pairs in the classroom, and the program focuses on the simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, 1990) of all members of the collaborative. The roots of the program can be traced back to the essential ideas found in peer coaching and peer observation (Joyce and Showers, 1980), the ideas spawned from the 1990's call for school reform (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Goodlad, 1990; Holmes, 1990; Kennedy, 1990; Zimpher, 1990) and the persistent appeal for improved and more effective teacher preparation. The model has grown and developed over nine years of largely successful implementation to include lesson study and response to intervention of RTI (Howard 2009).

HOW CORE WORKS

Student teachers are placed in collaborative pairs in classrooms. Prior to the beginning of the semester, the university Supervisor negotiates a mutually agreed upon day of the week to be on site. The Supervisor is available on that particular day each week of the semester to observe students teaching, meet with the Mentor teachers, and hold on-site small group seminars. Student teachers observe peers and Mentor teachers. Students stay at the school site for one year, moving to a new classroom at semester break. Schools are asked to agree to a one-year commitment in this model, however a two-year commitment is preferable.

Meetings are held weekly among student teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors to discuss, debrief, reflect and plan, with a focus on what worked. The rationale for an emphasis on the elements of success is logical. Teachers often spend a great deal of time anguishing over what did not work. But close study of what was not successful is less likely to yield future success than a careful examination of what elements contributed to the greatest effectiveness of the learning episode under consideration. However, eventually all aspects of the lesson are discussed in the lesson debrief including the challenges, concerns, the match between goals and outcomes, and the possible next steps. Insights of student teachers, mentors, principal and supervisor are shared. Interaction among the observers during lesson debriefs enabled participants to share teaching experiences and strategies, ask questions, discuss issues and concerns, obtain resources and materials, and to generally support each other.

These debriefing sessions, held after each student teaching session, were a key part the professional development of all participants. In the debriefing session, the student teachers who had finished a student teaching session were given the first opportunity to discuss their reflections on what went well followed by contributions from peer observers. After the successes were discussed and recorded a similar process was used to discuss challenges and possible next steps. The mentor teacher and faculty supervisor were the last to discuss their observations. The student teachers often were comprehensive in their understanding of the many and complex elements of the lesson and student learning.

Weekly on-site seminars were also planned with specific focus on areas of concern raised in the meetings by student teachers. In terms of teaching English learners, discussions in the meetings and seminars focused on development of academic language and literacy skills, content knowledge, higher order thinking skills and strategies. Mentor teachers, Second language coordinators, and Resource teachers from the school site are invited to these inquiry-based site seminars as a rule.

A STUDY OF THE MODEL AT ONE PARTNERSHIP SITE

The purpose of this evaluation was to investigate how the student teachers, mentor teachers, and faculty responded to the CORE program. Data was collected through participant observation, interviews, reflections and comments during meetings, and written reflections from participants at all levels in the program, looking at common themes from the data that were gathered throughout one complete semester.

Common themes and concerns were identified, and three dominant themes are reported here. Though there were a number of themes that arose in observation reports, student reflections, and in discussions, the three dominant themes that consistently arose were collaboration, teaching English learners, and classroom management.

Collaboration

In terms of collaboration, a major focus of data collection was on how part-time student teachers, full-time student teachers, and mentor teachers interacted. Despite some feeling a bit intimidated at first, the student teachers developed a personal and professional relationship with their mentor teachers. (These teachers were themselves excellent models of collaboration, as they would collaborate with other teachers at their school to do joint projects, activities, assignments, etc.). Most of the mentor teachers got the student teachers and observers involved early. When student teachers were not observing or teaching, they were often working independently or in groups with students.

Student teachers often reported on how encouraging, supportive, and motivating their mentor teachers were. They appreciated how teachers broke things down for students. Mentor teachers invited student teachers' ideas and helped them clarify their ideas. Mentor teachers helped student teachers develop a sense of what students need, and they also gave student teachers realistic ideas of what would work with particular age groups and what would not. Student teachers reported feelings of inclusion, respect and validation. Mentor teachers not only would tell student teachers about areas of improvement and help them learn from mistakes, but would also tell student teachers that they are doing right and give them confidence.

These benefits of mentor teacher and student teacher collaboration were not one way. Mentor teachers reported a sense of their own professional renewal from working with student teachers. Some of them adopted ideas, strategies, and techniques that the student teachers introduced into the classroom.

However, a major source of learning and development were the peers of the student teachers, and this is a strength of the CORE model. Student teachers reported on the psychological and professional benefits of learning with, and gaining support from, their peers. Some student teachers reported feeling more comfortable and safe asking their peers than the mentor teachers and university faculty. Part time teachers in particular related well to their full

time student teaching peers, as full time teachers had been part time teachers before and knew what their peers were going through. Different student teachers have different points of view and perspectives on what they saw, what was pertinent to them, what was more obvious, etc. They could count on peers for support, exchanging ideas, and feedback. They shared concerns and issues with each other and talked about their anxieties. They reported that they felt that they were all learning from each other.

A common comment among student teachers concerned how they worked together in the classroom as a team. Mentor teachers, full time student teachers and part time student teachers often met after class to plan future instruction and brainstorm who could do what. Having two student teachers in the classroom, along with parents and other adults, provided a lot of opportunities for student teachers to experience classrooms in which everyone collaborated to facilitate learning among a very diverse student body.

English Learners

This particular school had a diverse student body. Over three quarters of the student body were minority students (mainly Latino), and over half of the student body were English learners (see table 1). This was an excellent environment in which student teachers could learn how to effectively educate English learners. However, abilities to assess student needs, develop lessons and materials that make content more accessible, and instructional strategies and skills to effectively teach English learners were not easily developed, and frustrations with accommodating English learners were commonly expressed.

At the university, student teachers learned about different stages of second language and literacy proficiency levels and general techniques on how to accommodate English learners, but in real life, teacher candidates reported that they found that it was not so straightforward. Students in their classes differed greatly in many different areas, besides second language and literacy proficiency, that affected academic performance, such as first language and literacy proficiency, family background and parents' levels of education, prior experiences, prior education, personalities, attitudes, learning strategies and skills, prior development of content knowledge, amount of vocabulary, and more. Some of the students had high levels of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), which misled some student teachers into thinking that these students could handle well the lessons that the student teachers prepared and taught, but found that these students had many difficulties in comprehending the lesson and participating in group work due to their low levels of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Also, some students performed well in math, but did not do well in other subject areas that were more language intensive, such as social studies and science. Some student teachers stated that the English learners in their class had a difficult time with understanding the "abstract" concepts that they were teaching in these subject areas.

Despite these frustrations and problems, student teachers gained a lot of experience in developing instruction to meet the varied needs of all the students. Though frustrated at times, the student teachers realized the need to differentiate instruction for not only language proficiency levels, but also levels of prior content knowledge, learning skills and strategies, and other ways that students varied. In the beginning of the terms, some student teachers had looked for quick and easy techniques to accommodate English learners and other students, but soon found that there were no quick and easy solutions. Mentor teachers, peers, and university faculty helped the sometimes overwhelmed student teachers further develop and practice the

instructional skills and strategies needed to accommodate the varied needs of English learners and other students, such as adapting texts, using visuals to contextualize content, incorporating native language resources, pairing and grouping strategies, and more. Many of the student teachers expressed the need and desire to learn Spanish to help in their teaching and in their communications with parents. Student teachers found that through these techniques, some English learners who rarely participated during the lessons began to raise their hands and share their thoughts, and that student comprehension and understanding of stories and content increased.

Throughout the term, student teachers had many opportunities to try out instructional strategies and find out which worked and which were not so successful. For example, one student teacher tried grouping strategies to utilize peer scaffolding and support to help English learners, but then realized through observation that some students in some groups would end up doing the majority of the work while others participated little in the tasks and work. She realized that students sometimes needed specific roles or jobs that allowed students to take advantage of their strengths to contribute to the group process and work.

In short, student teachers found that not taking needs and strengths of various students into account while developing lessons ended up with some students getting it while others were not engaged at all. Student teachers found that they needed to develop a repertoire of strategies to engage all students in their lessons and activities.

Classroom Management

Classroom management was also a major concern among all the student teachers. This was one area in which student teachers felt the least prepared. Some felt that classroom management was the hardest part of their student teaching, and that classroom management and behavior issues were not a separate entity, but intimately connected to how effective their lessons were and how students learned. They reported that their classrooms would become chaotic at times. Issues that student teachers reported that they had to deal with included organizing and pacing lessons, setting boundaries, using their voice effectively, offering consequences and positive reinforcement opportunities, and others.

Student teachers found that classroom management was something that they had to consistently work on and reflect upon. A lot of discussion with peers, mentor teachers, and faculty focused on strategies and tools that they could use to more effectively manage their classrooms and make the environment conducive to learning without the distractions and problems that inevitably would arise. Student teachers reflected on what worked and didn't work, and worked to develop classroom management skills.

Throughout the term student teachers reported on not only the problems they faced, but what they learned and their successes. Many began to feel more comfortable in setting boundaries and other strategies, began getting more respect from students, and finding that their classroom environments and communities became more conducive to learning. In spite of these experiences and successes, student teachers complained that though classroom management was really very important, hardly any courses spent sufficient time on classroom management. Many stated that they think that more attention should be given to classroom management in the preservice program. However, overall, they realized that classroom management strategies and tools were not only something to be learned in their course, but also something that need to be acquired through experience in the classroom.

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Table 1
Student Demographics at the Student Teaching Site

Student Enrollment by Group

This table displays the percent of students enrolled at the school who are identified as being in a particular group.

Group	Percent of Total Enrollment	Percent of Students Scoring at Proficient or Advanced		
		English-Language Arts	Mathematics	Science
African American	1%			
Asian	2%			
Filipino	0%			
Hispanic or Latino	73%	31%	39%	13%
Pacific Islander	1%			
White (not Hispanic)	18%	50%	60%	
Multiple or No Response	0%			
Economically Disadvantaged	83%	32%	40%	15%
English Learners	54%	21%	34%	0%
Students with Disabilities	10%	9%	30%	
Students Receiving Migrant Education Services		29%	36%	