

CONTEXTS FOR COLLABORATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Contextos colaborativos para la formación de profesores

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Abstract

Thirty-five elementary teacher education candidates, three university professors, a school administrator in charge of curriculum and technology, a school principal, a lead teacher, fifteen cooperating teachers, and an IBM educational consultant were engaged in a school/university collaboration designed for candidates to complete teacher education coursework in meaningful contexts of real classrooms in real schools. Evidence from the collaboration demonstrates that the key elements of communication, trust, funding, and sharing responsibility contributed to the success of this collaborative effort.

Resumen

Treinta y cinco candidatos de pedagogía básica, tres profesores universitarios, un administrador escolar a cargo de currículo y tecnología, un director de colegio, un profesor guía, quince profesores cooperadores y un consultor educacional de IBM, participaron en un proyecto de colaboración escuela/universidad diseñado para que los candidatos a profesor finalizaran sus cursos de formación docente en contextos significativos de aulas reales en colegios reales. La evidencia recogida en la colaboración demuestra que los elementos claves de comunicación, confianza, apoyo y responsabilidad compartida contribuyeron al éxito de este esfuerzo colaborativo.

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The transition from teacher education candidate to teacher can be likened to walking a rickety rope bridge across a deep ravine. Sure the ropes may be attached to both sides, but we've all watched the scene in the movie where one side gives way and some unlucky soul either falls and disappears in the ragging river below or slams into the side of the cliff hanging on for dear life. No one should have to make such a journey without a safety net. Collaborations between universities and school districts create the support necessary for teacher education candidates to complete the tentative journey from student to teacher, to learn and grow professionally in supportive environments. The synergy resulting from collaborations can also provide a platform of support for experienced professionals who wish to increase their knowledge, improve their own teaching and enhance the learning of their students. It is difficult to learn and grow in isolation. Building collaborative contexts for authentic and exemplary practices to occur can help educators traverse difficult paths to professional development goals and to transform learning and teaching landscapes.

Theoretical Framework

All too often teacher education coursework at the university is removed from the real work of teaching. The gap between the effectiveness of knowing and knowing-in-action can be as daunting as any deep ravine and the sharing of ideas and talents among institutions of higher education and schools may be sketchy at best. In many teacher education programs candidates still experience learning to teach as "learning about teaching" in courses that consist primarily of lectures, readings, and peer-teaching in contrived settings. Teacher candidates frequently speak of the irrelevance of their college course work (Knowles, Cole, & Presswood, 1994) believing today as they have done in the past (Lortie, 1975), that experience in K-12 classroom settings is more beneficial to the development of their teacher identities. There is "wide-spread acceptance of the belief that teacher education programs will be better to the extent that they are

linked to schools and to those who practice in the schools” (Imig & Switzer, 1996, p. 220), and that the success of any learning-to-teach experience rests, to a great extent, on the talent and dedication of experienced classroom teachers (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

Collaborative efforts can serve an important role in the revision and improvement of traditional teacher education programs by relocating them in the real world of teachers and teaching. University/school collaborations are formed with the hope that they will establish richer learning environments for teacher education candidates and for PreK-12 students than either partner is capable of providing alone. Collaborations can provide a structure for exemplary practices in education that will transform “both teacher preparation and the schooling of children” (Millian & Vare, 1997, p. 711). Fullan (1993) insists that teacher educators can and should initiate educational reform through collaborations. A professional development collaboration serves to encourage “professional and intellectual stimulation as well as social support” (Hoy and Woolfolk, 1989, p. 129), necessary for teachers to realize what they know, to articulate their abilities to teach, and to identify their professional worth. Once given authority, support, and time to create collaborations, there is virtually no limit to what all participants in the educational enterprise can achieve.

Literature concerned with the professional development of preservice and inservice teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Grossman, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Phelps, 2000), agrees on the point of providing high quality, developmentally structured, and supportive environments in which learning-to-teach can take place. Reflection on practice (Calderhead, 1991), enhances understanding of the learning process for preservice teachers and provides them with opportunities to explore their own beliefs about teaching and learning. Occasions for teachers to “reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 597) promotes professional growth. Collaborations that create contexts for

teaching and learning may be the best hope for preparing and retaining highly qualified teachers for all students.

Background

The potential of collaborative partnerships in teacher education is clear. How the contexts for collaboration are developed can take many forms. This manuscript provides one example of one school/university collaboration, the BLOCK Program, describes how it was initiated, supported and sustained, and summarizes the benefit the collaboration brought to all involved. First the BLOCK Program is described. Differing perspectives present in school and college of education collaborations are discussed within the context of the BLOCK Program. This is followed by a description of the participants in the BLOCK Program and how they fit the profile of educators who are likely to initiate and sustain collaborations. Key elements that must be in place for collaborations to prosper and last, and how these elements were developed during the BLOCK Program are presented. Possible benefits of establishing contexts for collaboration in teacher education are offered.

The BLOCK Program is an experimental field-based elementary teacher education program in which candidates volunteer to complete two semesters of integrated methods course work while participating in a cohort practicum experience at a local elementary school. The program, supported by an IBM Reinventing Education³ grant, was designed to bring university faculty, teacher education candidates, classroom teachers and school administrators together in a community of teachers and learners. Through use of the IBM Learning Village communication tool a virtual 24-7 workplace was created for teachers and university faculty to view candidates' lesson plans, to engage in discussions, to post reflections, and to generally keep track of one another.

Over a two year period, 35 elementary teacher education candidates participated in the BLOCK Program integrated curriculum and

practicum experience. Following initial approval for the project from the school district superintendent, the area superintendent, and the dean of the college of education, responsibility for managing the collaboration and creating optimal contexts for its development was left to a smaller action team. This group included a school administrator in charge of curriculum and technology, a district technology assistant, the school principal, a lead teacher, and three university faculty members. Approximately 15 cooperating teachers provided hands on training for teacher education candidates and assessment of their performance during this time. Three doctoral candidates from the college of education also taught methods courses at the school site and provided formative feedback to candidates through observations of their performance in the classroom. An evaluation of the project was conducted by an outside evaluator at the end of the second year of the project.

Data on the benefits of the BLOCK Program collaboration were collected through threaded on-line dialogues among teacher education candidates from the university-based Web Course Toos (WebCT), from communications on the IBM supported Learning Village web site, from observations, from evaluations of candidates by cooperating teachers, and through transcripts of interviews with cooperating teachers and candidates. Data were analyzed and coded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to identify themes and categories related to the benefits of creating contexts for collaboration in teacher education.

Moving the University to the School

The cultures of a university and a school may seem to exist in different universes. They certainly operate in different dimensions, on different time lines and under different forms of governance. However, the barriers these differences might pose to collaborations can be diminished through thoughtful and reasoned decisions and collaborative efforts. On another note, the surface similarities among schools and universities can seduce one into thinking all schools and

all universities are alike. Nothing could be further from the truth. Because of the differences that exist between any one school and another and between any one college of education and another, contexts for collaboration can be as diverse in character as they are in marriages. Some appear happier; some are more productive. For some, the realities of the collaborations do not match expectations and eventually the partners go their own ways. Building collaborative contexts cannot be undertaken without a willingness to sacrifice for the common good. Commitment to the collaboration has to exist at all levels though the responsibility for initiating and sustaining the partnership may shift from one level to another during its life. Different entities in the school district and at the university must be involved in spirit if not in actual attendance.

Teachers and universities professors live different professional lives. Teachers seldom enjoy the flexibility university professors have to come and go. Teachers spend their days in a highly structured environment where they are responsible for moving large groups of students through a tight schedule of events. Teachers must respond to situations in which they have little time to consider which approach might be best. They must act immediately and must have at their fingertips quick and concrete ways of handling an enormous range of issues (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Their primary responsibility is to the education and safety of their students. When a university professor hopes to introduce a group of teacher education candidates into any school culture, it must be done with the clear understanding that disruptions in the school schedule or activities may not be viewed favorably, and that an influx of teacher education candidates may be seen as hindering teachers' abilities to concentrate full attention on the students.

Before teacher education candidates in the Block Program were placed in J. M. Ullom Elementary School, university faculty visited with the administrator and a group of teachers to begin to form a collaborative partnership, to pave the way for routines that would facilitate the coming and going of university students and candidates,

and to anticipate possible difficulties that might arise at some later date. Candidates, along with their university professors, spent two days visiting all of the cooperating teachers' classrooms to become familiar with school schedules, different grade levels, and individual teaching styles. A luncheon was arranged by university professors at the school to provide an opportunity for candidates and the cooperating teachers to socialize in a relaxed atmosphere. Following the classroom visits and the luncheon, candidates offered their requests for specific grade levels and to be placed with specific teachers. Teachers were asked if they had a preference of candidates, but to a teacher, the Ullom teachers said that they would gladly welcome any of the candidates into their classes. In the end, the university instructors in collaboration with the lead mentor made the final classroom assignments for candidates. Candidates spent two days a week at the school for 15 weeks. Two candidates were placed with each cooperating teacher in order to stimulate reflective dialogue between candidates having like experiences.

People Who Mind the Collaboration

In establishing collaborations it is important to identify lynchpin people at both ends who help clear the ways for relationships to form and then stay around to see them through rough times. A teacher at Ullom who was also a university doctoral candidate, assumed the role of "Lead Mentor" for the BLOCK Program and held bi-weekly meetings with cooperating teachers to discuss the role of mentors and to problem solve any concerns the cooperating teachers may have had. This lead mentor also served as the go-to-person for the university liaison when issues had to be dealt with that did not involve administrative concerns affecting the entire school.

One assistant professor from the college of education was given reassignment to spend more time at the school site than would normally have been possible given the three course load required at the university. Though colleagues who choose to work in teacher education field

settings are frequently criticized heavily by their colleagues (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999, p. 6), they are every bit as likely to improve the profession and contribute significantly to their institutions as people who remain on campus to focus on “meaningful” research. University faculty most likely to work in school based collaborations may have recently come from positions in schools and are often junior faculty. Colleges of education must support the faculty who sustain collaborations by working in school-based initiatives, and reward their efforts in tangible ways. The responsibility of the university for teacher education does not end when candidates enter schools for practical experience and should not be left to people outside the jurisdiction of the university program (Goodlad, 1990).

School administrators and departments of educational leadership are vital to the growth and support of building school/university collaborative contexts. When administrators receive their degrees from programs that promote fostering collaboration and partnerships they will view part of their administrative role to be reaching out both to the community and to other educational programs within the university. The principal of J. M. Ullom had received her Ed.D. from such a department of educational leadership and understood the role of the administrator in nurturing the development of collaborative contexts. She joined the university faculty in securing grant funds from IBM, she prepared her teachers for their role as mentors of the candidates, she provided space, time, and encouragement for meetings and observations, she assumed an equal share of troubleshooting concerns, she offered technical support through school personnel, and by consistently welcoming faculty and students alike to the school, she made participants in the collaboration feel part of the school community.

The Integrated Curriculum

There were three main objectives underlying the integration of course content in the BLOCK Program. One goal was to deliver the

content through a field-based approach to help preservice teachers recognize the multiple dimensions of elementary classrooms. Another goal was to help candidates become increasingly aware of the ways to assist K-5 students' literacy development. And the third goal was to provide candidates practical experience with the ways that technology can assist teachers in their practice. The curriculum for each semester integrated four required courses along with a practicum experience. Two university professors developed a matrix that outlined what teacher candidates should know and be able to do by the end of each semester in each of the four methods courses and then considered which experiences were most worthwhile for the candidates. This process challenged some taken-for-granted assumptions about teacher education and the benefits of specific course requirements to the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions of candidates. The university professors engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the meaning of "experience" and which place in the curriculum was the right place for a specific experience. They wanted candidates to discuss the meaning of their experiences as well as to talk about methods and techniques teachers use in delivering lesson content. Finding the most favorable balance between teaching strategies, course content, and candidates' practical experience in the classroom was a thought provoking process.

Instruction of the integrated curriculum had to be revised to support the on-site learning and experiences of the candidates rather than adhering to a prescribed content. Candidates readily gained the knowledge and skills needed to teach; however, this was accomplished through practical situations coupled with professional readings, class discussions, and assignments. Applying an integrated curriculum in the BLOCK program highlighted the reality that boundaries created by traditional education course work and traditional delivery of content are indeed artificial. The complexities of teaching are masked by traditional course offering. Integrating the content of preservice teacher education courses more closely matches the multiple dimensions of teaching found in the field.

Two teachers at the school who were also part time instructors for the university taught two to three components of the integrated curriculum each semester. Having courses delivered by the teachers who were serving as cooperating teachers for the candidates provided an additional element of real teaching in real contexts in which to situate methods content. Teacher education candidates must encounter concrete problems in conjunction with the introduction of theoretical content in order for the theory to become clear and for the candidates to integrate it into their cognitive structures on teaching (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). A context must be created for self-examination by teacher education candidates, supported by university faculty and classroom teachers.

The Integration of Technology

Mills & Tincher (2003) argue that preparing teachers who are “technology integrators will require a professional education curriculum that is infused with opportunities for teacher candidates to learn with technology and model technology use throughout their professional preparation” (p. 398). The use of technology in educational settings is now focused on how to use technology for instructional purposes and to improve student learning (Salpeter, 2003). The IBM RE3 Grant made it possible to place a laptop computer in the hands of every participant in the BLOCK Program and provided a web-based communication tool for use by the candidates, teachers and university professors. This tool, the IBM Learning Village, was configured to meet the specific needs of the participants, to help teacher candidates create lesson plans, address national standards and receive timely feedback from their cooperating teachers and university professors on lesson plans, instruction and learning activities.

Qualities of Successful Collaborations

Moving against tradition in teacher education is nigh impossible without support from colleagues and teacher education candidates

willing to try new ways of doing things. The demands on human resources in building professional relationships should never be underestimated. While collaboration promotes risk taking and creative problem solving, both approaches necessary for change, when people work outside of their normal comfort zone the element of stress is great. The success of the BLOCK Program hinged on four key elements: Information, Trust, Funding, and Sustaining the Relationship.

There was a continuous two-way flow of information between the institutions involved in the BLOCK Program. There were point people at different levels who had the power to make decisions at either site, to macro manage through administrative mandate and creatively solve problems in ways that would satisfy both entities. Formal and informal communication took place among different groups; teachers met with university faculty, teachers met with administrators, candidates met with administrators, candidates met with university faculty, candidates met with consultants from IBM, teachers met with consultants from IBM. Problems were discussed and solved at varying levels of concern. Not everyone was involved in every decision, but every decision was communicated to all other participants in the program.

The fluid information flow led to trust among the participants. People knew what to expect, they understood that someone would help them if they needed assistance and that there was always someone available to answer the phone, someone who was ready to listen and entertain more than one way to solve a problem. Trust was also encouraged through the common backgrounds of both the teachers and the university professors. The university instructors were able to demonstrate skill in teaching elementary students and knowledge of content. They served as substitutes in cooperating teachers' classrooms while the cooperating teachers received training from the IBM consultants. University instructors understood the elementary school environment, respected the teachers who worked there and helped them complete formative evaluations of the candidates.

Funding made a wealth of equipment available, i.e. laptops, video cameras, tape recorders, and digital cameras. Funding made it possible for university instructors to spend more time at the school site. Funding made it possible to buy out teachers' time for training sessions and for time to meet with candidates. Travel for participants to attend conferences and meet with other professionals engaged in the same efforts was also made possible. Food was provided for meetings and work sessions. The perquisites afforded by funding also served to increase the attention paid to the project by members of the school and university communities who were not directly involved. Funding, regardless of how small or large, seemed to raise the possibility that the people receiving the funding must be engaged in something important.

Sustaining any collaboration always requires perseverance, patience, professionalism, and performance. The rapidly changing context of any educational setting can quickly lead to disappointment. Principals can be moved, funding runs out. Doctoral candidates who have been working in the program graduate and new doctoral students must be recruited. Each group of teacher education students, teachers, and elementary students represent different abilities, different skills, and possess different levels of knowledge. Anticipating these differences and adjusting for them can alleviate some of the difficulty of transitions to be expected in any relationship. Keeping a high profile of university involvement at the school site during any collaboration will lead members of the school community to expect and be ready for continued relationships. University faculty in the BLOCK Program frequently visited the school even when there were no meetings and no formal observations to be completed. They were recognized at the school and they knew the names of the teachers, staff and even some of the students. After the first cycle of the BLOCK Program was completed at Ullom, the principal hired some of the candidates as first year teachers. Employment of university candidates at the site of the collaboration effectively demonstrated the reason for beginning the collaboration in the first place.

The talented people collaborations bring together in a common cause will likely achieve their goals. Working together helps individual overcome challenges and settle conflicts they might not be able to handle on their own. Collaborations blaze trails and provide reference points from which others can replicate successes and avoid disappointments. Collaborations promote holistic, continuous approaches to the training of teachers and the improvement of classroom practices.

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