

# Intramural Teaching: A Team Approach to Mentoring

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If schools became places where teachers studied their own practice together and were rewarded for doing so, future teachers would be inducted into a professional community where collegiality and experimentation were norms. In such a setting observation and conversation among persons at different career stages would expand the alternatives available to the novice and dramatize the limits of personal and local experience. Future teachers would get the message that learning from teaching was part of the job of teaching. (Feiman-Nemser and Buchman, 1985, p.64)

As teacher education reform continues to develop, the importance of how educators train proteges remains in the forefront. Eighteen years ago, Kenneth Zeichner (1980) first called for a constructivist research approach in order to glean information about the mentoring process. He stated that such ethnographic approaches would help us build a firmer knowledge of what is learned during the student teaching experience and subsequently offer possible solutions to ease the complex transitional period of preservice teaching. This paper delineates such an approach to enhance our understanding how the conventional boundaries of mentoring dynamics can be further examined by exploring a team's mentoring interactions and conversations and juxtaposing those dynamics with what we know of the dynamics of traditionally-paired dyads.

Research has shown that our proteges are "active agents" (Lacey, 1977) in their socialization as professionals, not puppets mimicking the cooperating teacher, and that working with an experienced teacher will help shape a beginning teacher's beliefs and practices (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Huling-Austin, 1990; Staton & Hunt, 1992). We also understand that there is more to teaching than our performance in front of a class of children. Beginning teachers are emergent professionals and so must be versed in a range of teaching activities: curriculum development, staff development, school policy and new forms of collaborative relations with colleagues (Lieberman, 1989). A variety of forces shapes the neophyte teacher, thus an "ecological" (Copeland, 1982; Goodlad, 1994; Yinger & Hendricks-Lee, 1993) approach to teacher preparation has been heralded by reformers in the field. These approaches consider the systemic/holistic influence of context upon teacher learning and socialization.

Given the importance of how teacher proteges are being prepared for their changing roles as teachers, the purpose of this study was to look closely at one mentor teacher group in order to examine the intricacies of team mentoring dynamics and to determine how and what interns learn from their mentoring experience with multiple personnel as opposed to traditional mentoring dyads/triads operating with a single cooperating teacher/mentor. Practice and theory converge as this study explores how teachers are being socialized by a team approach to mentoring. Questions to guide this study include:

What is the structure of the mentoring team? How does it operate? How are responsibilities and roles divided? What does the team do? What kinds of talk occur during the mentoring experience? How do the dynamics of traditional dyads differ from those of the team? What advantages /disadvantages are there to the team? What effect does this approach have specifically on proteges?

### **An Ecological Framework**

Context and conversation are key words in the conceptualization of intern growth and learning. Acquiring high-level “working knowledge”(Yinger & Hendricks-Lee,1993) and developing a practice that differs greatly from what we, ourselves, may have experienced as student teachers is greatly enhanced through learning opportunities that extend beyond traditional single cooperating teacher supervision. The new world of teacher preparation and socialization provides effective contexts for teacher learning which combine colleges of education with community schools and provide opportunities for doing and reflecting, collaborating with other teachers, looking closely at students and their contexts, and encouraging ecological learning – in other words, a team approach to mentoring. The cement for these concentric layers of context is the common language shared by a community of learners. This common language allows us to talk “clearly and straightforwardly about teaching without offending the teacher” thus enabling us to “describe and demonstrate underlying principles of teaching and learning” (Little & Nelson, 1990, p.4).

Darling-Hammond (1994) states that the professional teacher is one who learns from teaching rather than one who has finished learning how to teach, and the job of teacher education develops the capacity to inquire systematically and sensitively into the nature of learning and the effects of teaching. Professional development strategies that work in improving teacher learning and socialization into the profession share several features (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996, p.203). They tend to be experiential, engaging teachers in concrete tasks of teaching; grounded in participants’ questions, inquiry and experimentation as well as profession wide research; collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators; connected to and derived from teachers’ work with their students as well as to examinations of subject matter and teaching methods; sustained and intensive--supported by modeling, coaching and problem solving around specific problems of practice; and connected to other aspects of school change. This investigation utilizes these theoretical frameworks to examine the workings of one mentoring team and unravel the dynamics that enabled them to operate as a collaborative learning unit.

### **A Redefinition of Teacher Education: The Sociocultural Perspective**

Teacher knowledge is often tacit knowledge and a great deal of expertise about teaching resides in the heads of experienced teachers. Literature is presently focusing on the knowledge of teachers about their craft (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Feiman-Nemser, 1990), but, as now organized, schools do not provide for professional development or for the introduction of innovations in teaching practices (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). New sources of learning are extremely limited and studies of teachers of varying lengths of service show that most experienced teachers who work in isolation

from peers continue to do the same thing they did when they first entered teaching 10,15 or 20 years ago and now they find their jobs monotonous and unchallenging. Beginners develop initial skills by trial-and-error learning and begin to deplete their fund of ideas after about the fifth year of teaching (Rosenholz, 1986, p.524).

Proposed reforms such as higher standards for entry into the field, better salaries, merit pay and career-ladder plans will not be enough. These won't change teaching practices unless we change the settings in which teachers work at the same time. "Teachers' skill development depends heavily on collaborative support and exchange" (Rosenholz, 1986, p.518) and teaching cannot be reformed until it is understood that schools must be a context for teaching and that context itself must be a "teaching context" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p.6).

The basis for this theory of ongoing teacher education is derived from the contextualist and interactionist schools of human development relating back to Vygotskian notions. Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher-order functions develop out of social interaction and that development cannot be understood by mere study of the individual. We must also examine the "external social world" in which that individual has developed. Information regarding "cultural tools and practices" is transmitted from experienced members to inexperienced members allowing growth to occur in the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978)--a place where the learner has partially mastered the skill but can successfully employ it and internalize it with the assistance and supervision of a veteran. Our beginning teachers operate in this "zone of proximal development". An approach to teacher education that optimizes this type of "scaffolding" (Wertsch, 1979) by supporting the learner's extension of current skills and knowledge to a higher level of competence provides the collaborative support and exchange that is truly teacher education reform. Social interaction with colleagues who are more expert in the use of the conceptual tools of the culture is an important "cultural amplifier" to extend the cognitive processes (Rogoff & Gardener, 1984, p.97). Veteran teachers can thus "amplify" the apprenticeship of beginning teachers and ease their socialization into the profession through situational guidance that offers both support and challenge.

### **Methodology**

This research incorporated qualitative methods, and emerged as a sociocultural exploration of a mentor team in the context of an innovative teacher education program. Data consisted of interviews, reflective journals, observation of teachers teaching and document analysis. Data gathering and analysis occurred simultaneously over a twelve month period. Mentors involved in this state's induction program were expected to prepare beginning teachers to satisfy the state's updated criteria for continuing education. This description offers a holistic view of how that evolved.

The team site to be studied was situated in a Paideia middle school in an urban Midwestern area. The school was involved in a university-school partnership and had been so involved for eight years. This Professional Development School (PDS) serves an 83 percent minority student population and is situated in a lower socio-economic community. The College of Education lies within a large research institution, is involved

in the Holmes Partnership, and has a detailed PDS structure in place. This structure consists of team teaching of some university courses by university and school faculty, weekly teaching experience in the fourth year for teaching associates in various settings, and a fifth year paid internship, within a team structure, consisting of four mentor teachers, two interns and a campus-based faculty or teacher-in-residence. For this research, I was the assigned campus-based faculty at this particular school and operated as a participant observer on the mentor team.

The primary informants were the seven mentor team members. All team members are white and two are males. All team mentor teachers have at least ten years of teaching experience. Two had not previously served as mentors and none have received any formal mentor training. I operated as a participant observer on the mentor team and interviewed and documented the conversations with teachers-in-residence about traditionally-paired dyads. These observations, as well as observations of interns' teaching and document analysis of personal reflection journals and intern preparation guidelines provided for additional triangulation of interview perspectives.

Interns requested the schools in which they were placed and many (including Damon, an intern studied in this research) returned to schools where they had previously been "teaching associates" in the fourth year of their practicum. For the fifth year of the teacher education program, they were placed in a school for one year, paid the equivalent of a substitute teacher and regarded as "the teacher" by both faculty and students from day one. This necessitated an extensive orientation program through the university and the partnering schools. All mentor participants on our particular team taught at the same grade level and all had 10-21 years of experience teaching. Throughout the school year, both interns on our team experienced a process of socialization into teaching--a process in which they became active participants. That became the focus of this exploration. I wanted to know how the team facilitated that socialization. Their stories, unearthed in initial interviews, revealed several categories of concerns: instructional concerns; management concerns; assessment and evaluative concerns (both for themselves and their students) and social/personal concerns. Analysis clarified how the interns "worked through" these challenges with the support structure of the mentor team throughout that first year of teaching. The findings in this article pertain to the two interns' case stories and all names used within the paper are pseudonyms. As Damon and Jamie (the interns) embarked on a year of becoming teachers and eventually emerged as teachers, we team members analyzed and documented their progress.

Qualitative research methods depend upon the collection of abundant data and a systematic analysis of that data to reveal its meaning. Interviews in this study were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. Analysis of the data was ongoing, interactive and emergent as I noted reflections; sifted through materials to identify similar phrases, relationships, patterns and themes; isolated commonalities and differences of themes and then took them out into the field on the next wave of data collection. Data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification were interwoven before, during and after data collection in parallel form (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as basis for analysis.

I used triangulation to reinforce data interpretation. The data set contains information from a variety of sources including conversations, document analysis, and observations along with reflective journals--providing a connected view of the multiple aspects of beginning teacher socialization. Member check also provided an essential component of triangulation. Fellow mentor teachers on the team and the PDS coordinator shared perspectives regarding the interns' teaching experiences. The interns themselves saw preliminary glimpses of the data and were asked to share their insights. Team participants gave feedback about my interpretations throughout the duration of the research.

Teachers-in-residence who worked with traditionally-paired mentoring dyads, and scholars at the university reviewed the data and shared additional insights. We met regularly throughout the year-long project at two-week intervals to compare the traditional dyad mentoring experience with that of the mentor team.

### **The Team-A Community of Learners**

The data analysis process included the creation of the interns' narratives relating to their experience on the team. Following are their stories as they told them over the course of the year. Even though our interns had been prepared by the same university program, they were very different people. Their connection to the team community was not automatic, but for Jamie, the transition to teacher seemed to be seamless. Jamie was mature even beyond her 27 years and competently fielded all problems with her 7th grade class, "the Mariners," in a respectful yet nurturing manner. She shared a classroom with Ms. Able, a veteran of 14 years and commented:

When I watch Ms. Able teach and work with the other mentors on the team, I see what teaching is all about. I tried to be a friend, then a disciplinarian, but I learned that to teach is to be a facilitator. I have watched each of my mentors teach and although their approaches are different, their goal is the same. We help our students make informed choices and it's our job to help them be informed. My role now is much different when compared to the one I entered the teaching profession with. Through growth and the support of the various personalities on the team, I have learned to look at my previous mistakes, critically reflect, and truly begin to focus on what made my teaching work. (11/13/97)

It was a team practice to script as we observed interns (several mentors used laptops for this) and to include several comments/suggestions in our notes to the interns. These notes were then copied and given to the intern and all other team members. Eight themes guided our observations/conversations, and these themes reflected the attributes of effective teachers as per the teacher education program at the university. They became a common language we used to talk about our teaching that was specific and non-judgmental. They grounded our observations in authentic language that was familiar so that we could "describe and demonstrate underlying principles of teaching and learning" (Little & Nelson, 1990, p.4). Our common themes included: learning, instruction, content, curriculum, context, professional growth and development, grounded theory and knowledge, and collaboration. These themes correlate with Student Teacher Performance

Based Licensure and Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) components of effective teaching for student teacher standards. The common theme "learning," for example, states that learning is an

Active, goal oriented, constructive process dependent on the mental activities of the learner. Learners are seen as producers of their own knowledge, not merely consumers of information delivered to them. This constructivist view of human cognitive learning addresses various mental activities involved in human information processing. (Cincinnati Initiative for Teacher Education [CITE] Handbook, 1997,p.3)

As Jamie discussed reflection she was talking about several opportunities. After the observation the interns typically read the scripted notes from the mentor and reflected privately about their performance prior to the debriefing. At a later time, intern and mentor had a post conference touching on highlights of the lesson, problems and concerns. At the next team meeting, discussion and "social reflection" followed as we focused on the authentic critical activities of teaching and learning rather than abstractions and generalities. Interns also kept a reflective journal for their portfolio.

Often, at the team meetings, which were held every other Tuesday before school, the interns focused the discussion according to their areas of need or expertise. Jamie was very organized. Her evaluation and assessment of students and her implementation of reading workshop procedures enlightened our mentor team on several occasions. No teacher taught during these meetings--no individual was in charge. We negotiated topics according to our needs as a group.

Besides Jamie's presentation on the workshop approach and managing the gradebook, we heard from other team members about classroom management, portfolios, writing the curriculum vita, teacher as researcher, formative evaluation procedures (for interns), peer coaching, use of the team's language framework, scripting, pre/post evaluation conferencing, and adapting to the context of school and community. The interns contributed as "experts" in matters of pedagogy, management, and content, as did the veteran teachers. We shared from our authentic experience, and our common language enabled us to delve into the deeper meaning of "why" things worked through our reflection and discussion. We all mentored each other.

At the end of her internship, Jamie described herself in a reflective journal entry.

I now realize how unprepared I was to take on a full load and begin teaching. I've had friends who had nightmare experiences with their cooperating teacher because their personalities clashed or the mentor teacher didn't approve of the way the mentee taught. That didn't happen here. I was given the support of a university liaison, mentors, professional practice and career teachers, as well as other interns in my same position. The professional support and leadership I received *from the team was guidance that was invaluable.* (4/13/98)

In an exit interview as I was leaving the field, Jamie referred to the team as a “collection of peers who are all concerned with becoming better teachers” (5/12/98).

Damon did not have the same seamless transition into teaching. One might say his threads indeed got tangled. At a team meeting early in the year the following exchange took place. At 8:09 one Tuesday morning Mr. Newton (Damon’s classroom mentor) addressed the team.

In answer to all of your unspoken questions, I do not know where Damon is. He knew about the team meeting. We discussed it yesterday when we went over lesson plans. I am concerned about the fact that he’s been late 3 days in the last week. That’s a pattern that needs to stop.

Jamie’s discomfort was obvious--a fellow intern was struggling she asked: “Do I need to leave?” A potential trash-talking session was avoided as two other mentor teachers got the meeting focused. Ms. Liber asked that we proceed with the scheduled topic, student assessment. “Jamie, did you bring your print out sheets for recording student work? Let’s take a look at those as we’d planned.” Another mentor, Ms. Able responded: “Let’s proceed with the business at hand and maybe he’ll arrive. We need to focus on punctuality and professionalism in our personal de-briefings with Damon.” At 8:21 a ruffled Damon arrives. “I’m sorry; I forgot all about the meeting.” (10/8/97).

The beginning of this example sets the tone for the mentor team as community, but it also reveals the way authentic, day-to-day personal problems of the interns were dealt with. The situation with Damon’s tardiness was not an isolated incident, but the suggestion that we work it out personally with Damon as we debriefed was an acceptable measure. Jamie’s discomfort was real and warranted. In a community, problems and conflicts arise and the equitable problem solving of the group adds to the cohesion of the community unit. Damon, in the beginning of his internship, had trouble connecting to peers as professionals (9/9/97). Even though he had taught in the same classroom the year before as a teaching associate and felt he had a good working relationship with at least one of the team members, Damon admitted he lacked organizational skills and personal confidence (9/9/97).

Later, Damon attested to the value of regularly reflecting on his teaching and collaboratively discussing those reflections with other colleagues.

The regular meeting time every other Tuesday morning is so helpful, and I know I need the help. I just don’t feel like a teacher. I’m stuck with that “friend versus teacher” relationship with my students and my peers. I don’t feel responsible enough to be a teacher. I know I need to get organized. (10/29/97)

As a team, we made a concerted effort to get Damon to organize himself by discussing the rationale behind teacher behavior, although my first reaction was to think “he’s just not trying--he needs to get serious.” It’s a good thing I wasn’t his single cooperating teacher. Initially Damon had a hard time “doing his homework.” He thought

he could stand in front of the class and “wing it”--that’s what being a teaching associate was like last year, but that was one day a week (10/29/97).

Damon’s lesson plans and directions to the students were also abstract. His long term plans for the first quarter of language arts instruction merely stated “READ.” Transitions were a problem. Damon was personal and natural outside of class, but while teaching for long periods, he developed a monotone. Class disruptions became more frequent. In an observation (9/12/97) that was fairly typical for Damon’s teaching early in the year, Mr. Newton noted these questions after scripting:

1. The timing technique for free-writing may be creating a problem--is 20 minutes too long?
2. The instructions seem very abstract. Notes on the board? Examples? Student generated work? I couldn’t determine the focus of the lesson. What curricular objectives did you have in mind? The students are quiet, but are they engaged and learning?
3. Is the homework connected to the lesson?

Observations and scriptings by other team members yielded similar comments, yet as Damon read and reflected, restructured and de-briefed, he did not appear to become discouraged. As a team, our strategy was to focus on the rationale for clear statements of expectations, relevant homework assignments, maintaining curricular coherence and developing a teacher persona. Each of us had something to offer and Damon reacted to our comments in the spirit in which they were given.

I began my year with a lot of uncertainty in terms of planning. My personality and lack of experience led me into the year “flying by the seat of my pants” and going without solid lesson plans. My problem was, in all honesty, I was getting away with it for awhile. But with six other team members keeping an eye on you, it’s hard to “pull the wool over anyone’s eyes.” Plus, I had many different kinds of suggestions. The team began to help. They knew I was in trouble, but it was never a team meeting about “Damon’s incompetence.” Ms. Able showed me some ways to write lesson plans that are short, but detailed. You reviewed the curricular objectives to focus my planning and we made a grid sheet to check things off. Mr. Newton cautioned me about the overuse of threats and detention, Ms. Liber taught me the value of being flexible, and Ms. Weber proposed a homework collection strategy that saves time and disruption. I am pleased with the way the team helped me deal with the losses I’ve had to take. I’m the rookie. But I have grown. (3/12/98)

The team took an active role in allowing me to become a better teacher. I never felt for a second that any team member was “downing” me for doing something in a way they would not have done it. I was encouraged to develop my style and use it. (4/8/98)

About Damon's growth, one team member commented:

You set a standard. You became reliable, dependable, and open to change. You taught me about perseverance and hard work. We know now what an intern can be, and we'll settle for nothing less. (Ms. Weber, 5/12/98)

Damon ended the year feeling like a teacher. In fact, by June 20th of that year he already had a job--he was a teacher! In an exit interview Damon said:

This mentoring all falls together as a team process. It was non-judgmental colleague support. Personality conflicts aren't a real issue because so many personalities work for a goal--to be better teachers. It's kind of like the intramural hockey team I play on. We discuss techniques and strategies by reviewing the events of our games. Then we work to become better players--together. Occasionally we consult a rulebook or expert on game strategy, but basically it's *us helping ourselves*. (5/12/98)

### **Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

In retrospect, maybe Damon's intramural concept has some real merit. People generally participate in intramural activities because they want to. That idea of "want to" is an important concept. Our mentors were volunteers. Mentors should want to be mentors; they should not just want an extra salary boost. Are all teachers who teach children good at teaching teachers? Current data tells us that is not the case (Little & Nelson, 1990), and unfortunately our mentors are often selected in these ways.

The team aspect of the intramural metaphor certainly fit with our mentoring procedure. We called ourselves a mentor team. We met regularly at scheduled times and focused on the needs and areas of expertise of our participants. We re-played our own practices, and had other colleagues observe so that we could improve on our shortcomings. There was no "coach" because we were all coaches--we coached each other, and on game day we supported each other. We had expectations for hard work, constructive criticism, reflection on our own practice and restructuring if necessary. We practiced together to improve the team as a whole. The rookies, as well as the veterans, had a voice and our common language helped to facilitate our plans for success. When we had a victory we celebrated together and when we lost, it was not one person's defeat, it was an opportunity for growth as a collective group. Our evaluation of our progress was formative and we dealt with each contest as it came. Improvement was our desired outcome and we were only as strong as our weakest member.

Some who had not participated on a team before needed training and support to collaborate with other team members, but as long as the "want to" was there, success was eminent. My son's football team had an expression that seems apropos: *Pride, poise, persistence*. The team concept works because the pride, poise and persistence of individuals combines to create motivation for modeling and learning together.

This study is by no means a prescriptive or portable answer to the problems we currently face in preparing productive student teachers. More research on the effects of mentoring is immediately necessary as states implement their own mentoring standards. This is a study of ecology, and a description of one mentor team--their conversations and their contexts. This study serves as a reminder of the human side of mentoring. It clarifies the complex and problematic side of teaching, the dynamics of the relationship between mentor and protege, and the richness of interaction that is possible through community. By inducting interns into an environment of conversation and collegiality through examination of our own practice, we are encouraging them to become professionals who value collaboration, experimentation, and inquiry through ongoing growth and learning.

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