

# Pre-Service Teacher Cohorts: Characteristics and Issues: A Review of the Literature

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Since their introduction to teacher education programs in the 1980s, teacher education cohorts have become a standard scheme of organization in teacher preparation programs. This literature review notes some common characteristics and issues in cohort operations. Cohorts contain a standard academic core, class scheduling, and timeline to program completion, providing a teacher socialization aspect at entry to the profession. While holding great potential for positive influence by encouraging goal accomplishments, cohorts can create unintended effects, like unhealthy competition, exclusion, and miscommunication. Accordingly, Teacher educators should provide guidance and clear communications to pre-service teacher cohorts to minimize potential negative outcomes.

**I**n *Redesigning Teacher Education*, Alvin Tom (1997) lists 11 principles of teacher education program design that he believed “encourage a teacher education faculty to deliberate on particular conceptual and structural issues while rethinking its programming” (p.14). Of these 11 principles, five of these ideas related to conceptual issues while six were programmatic recommendations. One structural recommendation Tom suggested was that “rather than being treated as individuals to be managed bureaucratically, prospective teachers should be grouped into a cohort that moves through a professional program as a unit” (p.149). This suggestion came from Tom’s personal and professional experiences and his idea that there was value in common shared ordeals by providing mutual support in a potentially frustrating experience while also providing efficient and effective administrative support to the pre-service teachers (Tom, 1997).

Tom was not the first to suggest the cohort model for pre-service teacher education. Cohort models in university-level programs for education administration were encouraged by the work of the Danforth Foundation in the mid-1980s (Milstein, 1992) and this prototype spread to teacher education programs (Howey & Zimpher, 1989). As Mather and Hanley (1999) noted, there is “some evidence that collaborative, thematic, cohort programs offer the best opportunity for identifying and reconstructing entry-level candidates’ misconceptions about teaching” (p. 236). Other researchers found overall support for cohorts as a model program from professors, clinical faculty, and students (Radencich et al., 1998) as an academic and personal support system (Howey & Zimpher, 1989), a source of insight from students from various backgrounds (Warring, 1990, July), and as a contributor to joint effort and teamwork (Rolheiser & Hundey, 1995).

Attributes of pre-service teacher cohorts have theoretical support in the concepts of social constructivism. This term is operationally defined using Richardson's two-point description of constructivist teacher education (as cited in Dangel & Guyton, 2004) as processes of "a) teaching teachers to teach according to a constructivist approach and b) working with teacher-learners in a constructivist way to help them understand their tacit beliefs and introduce new concepts as possible alternatives to those held by the learner" (p. 3). Both of these definitional aspects are important in understanding the constructivist attributes of pre-service teacher cohorts in both operational characteristics and functional issues.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Cohorts**

Goodlad (1990) depicted a cohort as a group of pre-service teachers that remained in a group throughout the program, sharing experiences, instruction, and opportunities to mature professionally in a common social environment. In the latter 1980s, Goodlad found few formalized instances of the cohort model in U.S. teacher education programs. However, in recent years, the cohort model has become more prevalent in teacher education programs, as teacher educators look for efficient and effective ways of preparing pre-service teachers for entry into teaching practice (Bullough, Clark, Wentworth, & Hansen, 2001; Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2005).

In their study of pre-service teachers, Dinsmore and Wenger (2006) characterized cohorts simply as "having four or more classes together in a given semester" (p.59). In a broader study of teacher education, The Holmes Group (1995) explained the functioning and purpose of teacher education cohorts broadly as one where:

...the members of each cohort [are] journeying together along a common path of professional learning and socialization that leads to lifelong personal and professional growth and development. No

longer should any student in a school of education lack the support of a group of students who form their own small learning community. Each student [are] part of a group in which fellow students take an interest in each other's attainments. We expect that the members of a cohort will form a mutually supporting network that endures for many of them throughout their professional careers. (p. 50)

This description listed many characteristics common to pre-service teacher cohorts. In essence, the studies cited above illustrate the student teacher cohort as a mechanism facilitating the group transfer of content learning and pedagogical techniques and as a socialization process for pre-service teachers and others involved in the cohort's sphere of learning. Accordingly, knowledge of teacher socialization is vital in understanding the operational of pre-service teacher cohorts.

### **Socialization Process of Teacher Training**

According to one definition, teacher socialization "is a complex, communicative process by which individuals selectively acquire the values, attitudes, norms, knowledge, skills, and behaviors of the teaching profession and of the particular school or educational culture in which they seek to work" (Staton, 2008, p. 1). It is in this development that teachers acquire the shared distinctiveness of the teaching profession. The idea of teacher training as "...the development of a professional identity by trainee teachers as embedded in the sociocultural practice in which they are participants" (van Huizen, van Oers, & Wubbels, 2005, pp. 281-282) is attributed to Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology theory. This concept is defined as "the study of the development of psychological functions through social participation in societally-organized practices" (Chaiklin, 2001, p. 21). van Huizen et al. (2005) summarized a Vygotskian model for pre-service teacher education into five principles, the first of these being "...that professional learning and development

are best conceived and conditioned as an aspect of evolving participation in a social practice” [emphasis added] (p. 274).

The theory entitled communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is also central to the idea of teacher socialization. According to one of its developers, communities of practice “are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006, para. 3). That relationship provides a vehicle for socialization by fostering pre-service teacher involvement in a program featuring the achievement of individual goals and values, social relations, and teamwork within a teacher education program setting (van Huizen et al., 2005). Other learning models followed a related theme, influenced by the same concepts as teacher socialization. Such theories included mediated action (Wertsch, del Río, & Alvarez, 1995), cultural nature of human development (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), and community of learners (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). Teacher education cohorts usually followed these models of community and social activity-based learning.

Dinsmore and Wenger (2006) found “cohorts must be infused with a strong sense of community to enhance the learning of nontraditional pre-service teachers,” noting that “relationships within the field experience, with peers, and with the instructors are important to pre-service teacher learning. When the relationships are negative, learning is hindered” (p. 71). Research on such negative matters within the pre-service cohort as a social-cultural entity illustrate that these issues come from many sources.

### **Issues in Cohorts**

Dinsmore and Wenger also noted that cohorts “create the structural opportunity to maximize and create a community minded culture that supports these central tenets of teacher learning” (p.58). Yet, some research indicates cohort-based

teacher preparation is not without significant issues in the formation of that culture.

For example, Barnett and Muse (1993) referred to detrimental competition in cohorts due to scarce resources, the conflict of group goals, and the demands of traditional grading. Additionally, Radencich et al. (1998) found “professor scapegoating,” where the group members blame the instructors for problems within the group. Other issues of this training model occurred when some cohort members non-assimilate into the cohort for personal, social, or academic reasons (Mandzuk et al., 2005). Mandzuk et al. also found that “many challenges of student cohorts were attributable to too much bonding and not enough bridging” (p.180), in a muffling effect occurring for some members of the cohort when “[s]ome student teachers [are] stifled their own growth as individuals because the dominant personalities in their cohorts unduly influenced them” (p.180). This consequence is the negative cohort effect of what Dinsmore and Wenger (2006) call “the power of relationships” (p. 71).

It is the inter-personal relational characteristics of cohorts that are often most problematic. In their study of a graduate teacher program in Special Education, Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) refer to the problems within the cohort as one of conflicting personalities. In their study, these issues were attributed partly to differences between the majority of their participants (female, white) and others (male, persons of color), suggesting that males and persons of color (both representing a minority in their study) were disruptive and domineering in the cohorts they researched. Indeed, Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott state that these negative dynamics were not present in other cohorts, exclusively female in membership. This troubling conclusion was disputed by Agnew, Mertzman, Longwell-Grice, and Saffold (2008) who found, to the contrary, an exclusionary and silencing effect on males and persons of color in a teacher education cohort program, suggesting that additional faculty training

and additional research are necessary to “improve the cohort system to reduce marginalization and silencing of its non-dominant members” (p.31).

In other analyses of teacher education cohorts, a common focus has been on interpersonal relationships within the group as opposed to the functioning of the learning environment. Seifert and Mandzuk (2006) described the outcomes of these relationships in what they noted as the unintended effects of cohorts. Their study indicated that these consequences were noted as both positive, such as the establishment of friendships, empathy, and compassion between cohort members, and negative, such as exclusion of some cohort members from activities and inaccurate and unproductive communications between cohort members, resulting in near “mass hysteria” over such issues as miscommunicated or misunderstood assignments. Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) expressed the challenges teacher educators face in working with cohort structures, due to variations between students in ethnic background, personalities, political beliefs, socio-economic status, and sex, describing splits in cohort cohesion as an analogy to a dysfunctional family.

Other research provided additional insights both critical and supportive of pre-service teacher cohorts. Goss (2007) questioned the purpose of using cohorts, suggesting that the utilitarian and administrative function of cohorts may be the principal reason for its use in higher education. Clarke, Erickson, Collins, and Phelan (2005) noted that “the number of ideas that are generated and the opportunity to engage, share, and interrogate those ideas that are of primary importance” (p. 174) in the operation of a teacher education cohort. They concluded that this organization allows students to “sustain conversations about practice that allow us to discard those practices that are destructive to our learning community while selecting more ‘useful’ practices” (p 171). In a similar finding, Bullough, Clark, Wentworth, and Hansen (2001) concluded that the findings of their study “supports the value of cohorts to

teacher education as a means of providing beginning teacher support, enhanced opportunities to learn from other beginning teachers, and realizing that learning to teach is a community responsibility” (p. 108).

## Conclusion

The research on pre-service teacher cohorts illustrates that the use of this system of organization can contribute to effective teacher preparation and positively influences social and professional development for cohort members. There are support aspects of cohorts that can create an atmosphere of camaraderie and esprit de corps to facilitate individual academic and personal growth. Many research based learning models follow the same socialization basis used to justify teacher education cohorts. However, for some teacher education programs other facets of the cohort experience can create exclusion, rancor, and ill will between members of the cohort as well as the cohort and faculty.

Teacher educators should be aware of both the positive and negative dynamics in a pre-service teacher education cohort. Faculty must understand group socialization processes so that a supportive relationship can exist between instructor and students. Consideration should be given to prompt and accurate communications easily accessible to all cohort members. Faculty must be on watch for overbearing cohort members and dysfunctional cohort behaviors and should attempt to promote a sense of fairness and inclusion. Great sensitivity to the instructional needs of all members, balanced with a respect for the group and its individual constituents, will assist in making the teacher education cohort a positive mechanism for students and faculty.

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### **Author's Note**

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