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Independence Meets Interdependence within a Cohort Model of a Special Education Teacher Preparation Program

Robert F. Sumowski
Georgia College & State University

Roddran Grimes
Georgia College & State University

Students who experience educator preparation via cohort-based teaching models find themselves experiencing the occasionally contrasting dynamics of independence and interdependence on a daily basis. While the performance of teacher candidates' work product at the college level is measured individually through both college-based and independent external assessments, the cohort-based teaching model is largely dependent upon collaboration, shared experiences, and encourages candidates to view themselves as part of the whole rather than as individuals pursuing the goal of becoming P-12 teachers.

Keywords: collaboration, cohort, teachers, independence, interdependence

INTRODUCTION

The field-based cohort model of educating teacher candidates in Special Education has been in place at Georgia College & State University (GCSU) since 1987. The undergraduate program has been ranked #5 in the U.S. among Top 10 Best Undergraduate Teaching Programs among Regional Universities in the South (U.S. News & World Report, 2019) and #19 out of 400 Special Education programs (Teacher.org, 2016). In addition, the overall field-based cohort model at GCSU was named a finalist for the Christa McAuliffe Excellence in Teaching Award in 2008 and 2009 and received the National Wisniewski Award for making "singularly significant contributions to the theory and practice of teacher education" in 2008 (Wolpert, 2010).

The field-based cohort model offers teacher candidates a unique blend of traditional classroom-based college pedagogy supplemented with simultaneous field-based immersion and collaboration for two full academic years of teacher candidates' programs of study. Admission into the program involves a rigorous application process, which features a minimum grade point average (GPA), the mandatory meeting of multiple state and local criteria, and is capped by an extensive in-person interview with the entire program faculty. Taking place during the Spring semester of teacher candidates' sophomore year, candidates typically are notified of acceptance in the program by April 1.

Once accepted into the John H. Lounsbury College of Education (JHL COE), students undergo an intensive two-week orientation program prior to the onset of university coursework. The program then continues through four consecutive semesters comprising candidates' junior and senior years of college. Grouped in cohorts of 18-22 students each, candidates within each cohort follow a set program of study

and field-based placement together each term. In a typical week, cohort participants spend two full days taking college coursework from 9-6 pm as well as two to three full days in a field-based classroom from approximately 7-4 pm. Field-based assignments rotate so that students spend time in placement across grade level groupings of Pre-kindergarten-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Field placement assignments are scheduled so that candidates experience multiple types of Special Education (SPED) placement settings (inclusion, resource, and adaptive) in both rural and urban settings (Wolpert, 2010).

Students are expected to follow the parameters outlined in the College of Education's Handbook for Initial Teacher Candidates. The students are immersed in a cohort culture designed to inculcate them in the conceptual framework's guiding principle of "Educators as Architects of Change." This framework is designed to produce change agents, based on the following core principles:

- The Liberal Arts and integrated learning
- Professional preparation
- Human relationships and diversity
- Leadership for learning and teaching communities

All cohort activities stem from the conceptual framework's approach to link theory to practice in order to meet the needs of P-12 students in the 21st Century (John H. Lounsbury College of Education Initial Teacher Candidate Handbook, 2018).

INTERDEPENDENCE WITHIN THE FIELD-BASED COHORT MODEL

In this model, teacher candidates benefit from immersion in experiential learning through a concentrated and extensive field-based component. The model allows cohorts to become collaborative Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that promote rich group discussion weekly based on individuals' unique experiences within the field during the previous week. This interdependent dialogue fosters healthy debate of many sides of any issues candidates have encountered in the field, including social issues, the causes, topography, and treatment of different types of disabilities, educational approaches and policy, instructional delivery methods, ethics, and diversity issues.

In another example of the interdependent aspect of the approach, the cohort model also offers teacher candidates opportunities for ongoing peer-feedback and peer-tutoring, group cohort field trips, and presentations at research conferences. This approach is consistent with the notion that students learn as much or more from their peers as from their college professors. In a study of rural special education teachers, Childre (2014) found that peer support networks provided essential support and professional relationships evolved over time that helped teacher candidates resolve problematic pedagogical issues. That same dynamic occurred for the students immersed in the cohort model. Additional benefits of the model include marginal college students having the experience of working alongside high achievers, which is consistent with the theory that a rising tide lifts all boats.

INTERDEPENDENCE: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

The interdependent aspect of the field-based cohort model yields its share of challenges. Though many assignments are completed in groups, student performance is measured individually. Tensions can arise when individuals are not active and full participants in group activities, assignments, and discussions. Professors have noted occasional attempts by weaker teacher candidates to freeloader on peers or small groups in which they are placed. At times, the model enables the development of social cliques which mentor leaders need to monitor, and faculty have learned that addressing these issues quickly and quietly minimizes their impact on overall cohort dynamics.

Benefits of the interdependent aspect of the model include a sense of camaraderie fostered by the group team-building activities that begin immediately upon teacher candidate enrollment, fostering an ongoing dialogue about field-based experiences upon candidates' return to class each week, and shared experiences that allow for the development of a support network and esprit de corps. The model also can

help alleviate feelings of isolation since collaboration allows candidates to bond and commiserate over any challenging academic or field-based events that might occur (Harris, 2000). Students carpool together to student teaching placement sites, they communicate via GCSU-sanctioned methods such as their authorized email accounts, and they connect informally via a candidate-led GroupMe app.

Faculty involved in implementing the model have noted that this approach promotes cooperation among students, creates a built-in networking system during job searches at the end of program, creates a family-like environment, and leads to lifelong friendships. Each cohort within the JHL COE is assigned a faculty member who is responsible for academic advising and “shepherding” their teacher candidates through the two-year pre-service teaching journey. This faculty member, also known as the mentor leader, is the advocate and “go to” person for cohort students. The mentoring process can be intense but also immensely rewarding for both the teacher candidate and mentor leader (Ambrosetti, 2010).

INDEPENDENCE WITHIN THE FIELD-BASED COHORT MODEL

In contrast with the interdependent aspects of this approach but consistent with traditional pedagogy within educator preparation programs, teacher candidates are expected to create original work products such as course assignments and portfolio components independently. As such, all work is assessed individually. Candidates are assessed individually throughout the experience, including during the selection process for admission, in response to daily and weekly course assignments, through semester grades, field-based assessments, state teacher certification tests, the edTPA evaluation, for scholarships and rewards, and through program-level assessments as required by external accreditation-related agencies such as the Council for Exceptional Children, the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, and the Georgia Board of (state university-level) Regents.

Aspects of Independence

- Individualized assignment of grades, assessments at local, state (certification tests), and national levels (e.g., edTPA assessment)
- Field placements remain individualized as candidates are assigned to different classrooms, grade levels, disabilities, populations, and locations
- Candidates must manage both instruction and behavior individually within field placements
- Post-college challenges during first year of teaching are individual in nature

Aspects of Interdependence

- Group dialogue and debriefing experiences complement the individualized aspect of field experiences
- Candidates work together on group projects, which simulate the professional-level expectations of collaboration once they become teachers, especially within inclusion Special Education settings
- Candidates come together to debrief, learn from the experiences of others, brainstorm solutions, and participate in collective analysis
- Group preparation, analysis of pedagogical approaches, sharing concerns and successes
- Systemic moral, emotional, and group support from the mentor leader and cohort colleagues and development of an understanding that these are shared experiences all teachers will face upon entry to the field
- Ongoing, lifelong system of networking, friendships, post-college support from mentor leaders and colleagues

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS ON THE FIELD-BASED COHORT MODEL

The field-based cohort model assists students in growing to become competent teachers as individuals, but does so largely through ongoing, shared experiences with other students going through the same process themselves. Understanding that learning pedagogy does not take place within a vacuum, the program facilitates the perspective of viewing one's individual experiences within the context of the experiences of others. The model reinforces the importance of forging and nurturing ongoing relationships with others while teacher candidates acquire their individual knowledge bases of skills involved in the profession. Since its inception, the model has been a valuable recruitment and retention method for the JHL COE. As a result of the hard work of teacher candidates and the support provided by mentor leaders via the field-based cohort model, in May 2019 32 students graduated with Bachelor of Science degrees in Special Education and are now certified P-12 teachers in the State of Georgia.

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