

# Chapter 25

## Learning to Teach: Cultivating Practice in a Mentor– Candidate Relationship

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes an approach to field experience that provides the opportunity for a long-term relationship between a teacher candidate and their supervising teacher in a teacher preparation program called Community of Teachers (CoT). CoT emphasizes the importance of this relationship in several ways. The program empowers teacher candidates and their mentors to choose one another. In addition, the length of the field experience provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to more deeply engage in the process of becoming a teacher within the context of a classroom and a school that they come to know well. A triadic relationship between the teacher candidate, supervising teacher, and university supervisor provides the opportunity for support as well as evaluative feedback for the teacher candidate. Benefits also accrue to the supervising teacher.*

### INTRODUCTION

Field experience is touted as one of the most important components of successful teacher preparation. During field experiences, teacher candidates identify and develop lessons and materials for classroom activities as they facilitate classroom routines and address classroom management. They work with students from culturally diverse backgrounds and those who have specific learning differences (Hanline, 2010;

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Villegas, 2007). While participating in field experience, teacher candidates are given the opportunity to apply what they have learned in coursework in an authentic context (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Field experiences are often the first opportunity teacher candidates have to learn about their own teaching propensities. They are provided the opportunity to try out who they may become as teachers. They ask themselves if they like the duties and responsibilities the role entails.

Teacher candidates best learn how to be teachers when university teacher preparation is complemented by extensive experience in a field setting under a master teacher (Zeichner, 2012).

Learning to teach is a complex, emotional, and demanding undertaking. Simply providing teacher candidates with access to a classroom during field experience does not guarantee that they will emerge from the experience with skills needed to successfully teach in their own classroom. Furthermore, field experience alone does not provide the opportunity for teacher candidates to reflect about themselves in the midst of their professional development. Zeichner's (2012) emphasis on the importance of the master teacher in a field setting is well noted, several other strategies to ensure that teacher candidates derive benefit from field experience are also critical to note.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe an approach to teacher preparation that encourages teacher candidates to reflect about their professional growth as they strive to become teachers and includes a rather unique approach to field experience. At our university there are three secondary teacher preparation programs. Our approach is called Community of Teachers (CoT). Students participate in long-term engagement in the field with a teacher who mentors them about teaching, and this is considered a cornerstone of the program. CoT emphasizes the importance of this relationship by empowering teacher candidates and their mentors to choose one another rather than placing teacher candidates in classrooms. This approach to field experience also differs from field experiences in many teacher education programs in that it requires teacher candidates to attend their mentor's classroom one day a week throughout their preparation. Finally, the approach also includes two other aspects of teacher preparation that are viewed as essential: 1.) a weekly seminar that provides the opportunity that socializes teacher candidates into the professions and allows them to practice teaching skills and; 2.) a professional performance portfolio that documents teacher candidates' developmental processes in becoming teachers. It is important to note that teacher candidates are guided throughout their preparation by a CoT faculty member who also serves as their seminar facilitator and supervises field experience and student teaching.

## **COMMUNITY OF TEACHERS**

Community of Teachers was designed to address some of the shortcomings of traditional teacher preparation. According to the founders of CoT, Drs. Tom Gregory and Susan Klein, limitations of typical teacher preparation included the relatively short duration of field experiences and the limited time spent deeply engaging with the work of a teacher (T. Gregory, personal communication, September 14, 2016). In addition, too often teacher candidates spent time in their field experience simply observing instead of taking the opportunity to enact some of the skills they were learning in university coursework. Finally, the seemingly random assignment of mentor teachers and candidates to each other, and the lack of preparation for mentor teachers to work effectively with teacher candidates was also considered problematic. Importantly, the founders of CoT, influenced by the work of Frances F. Fuller (1969), noted that too often teacher education does not address the personal concerns of teacher candidates until rather late in the process.

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