Student Cohorts, School Rhythms, and Teacher Education

By Robert V. Bullough, Jr., D. Cecil Clark, Nancy Wentworth, & J. Merrell Hansen

Fifteen years have passed since the discussions took place that lead to publication of the first Holmes Group Report, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (1986). This was the first national call to establish student cohorts, particularly as a means to achieve the "shared ordeal" Lortie (1975) argued was missing in teacher education and that was so badly needed to develop a genuine sense of professionalism. The promise seemed clear:

> Basically a "non-program" at present [exists in teacher education;] professional courses are not interrelated or coherent. The curriculum [of teacher education] is seldom reviewed for its comprehensiveness, redundancy, or its responsiveness to research and analysis. Advisement is often ineffective, leaving students to wander about, rather than progressing systematically in a cohort through their programs. (Holmes Group, 1986, p. 50)

The third Holmes Group Report, *Tomorrow's Schools of Education* (1995), elevated the importance of cohorts in teacher education:

> ...we recommend that [teacher education] organize its

Robert V. Bullough, Jr., D. Cecil Clark, Nancy Wentworth, and J. Merrell Hansen are professors in the Department of Teacher Education, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

> students into what we call "cohorts," the members of each cohort 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 would be 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)

Others have made a similar case (Bullough, 1997a; Goodlad, 1990; Tom, 1997).

Despite what appears to be a growing interest in the cohort idea and expansion of the practice, there have been remarkably few published studies. Arends and Winitzky put the case succinctly, "the direct evidence on the efficacy of cohorts is nonexistent" (1996, p. 546). However, two recent studies have appeared. Radencich et al. (1998) in their study of elementary and early childhood cohorts at a Southeastern university in the United States, compared cohorts to families, noting that they have "all the positives and negatives that can occur in family life" (p. 114). The "negatives" included cliquishness, particularly among female group members, difficulty accepting teacher-education faculty not directly associated with the cohort, and lowering of academic rigor as a result of student pressure on faculty. While these issues were serious, the students valued experience in the cohort, and "showed no desire to give up their teams" (p. 12). Mostly, they valued the support given by their peers. Bullough (1997b) describes how teaching cohorts positively changed his thinking about teaching and teacher education. Curious about student views of cohorts and of the value of the cohort program within which he taught, he sent a survey to a group of first-year teachers. Among his findings was that of the 15 students who returned the questionnaire (of 17 sent), all had remained in contact with one another following graduation. He concluded, "Friendships were formed through the cohort, but more importantly it appears that a sense of community was built that has extended into the first year of teaching and eased the transition, somewhat" (p. 29). These two studies suggest there is educational power in cohorts, but they are not without their problems.

Clearly, there is a need for more systematic study. In the present study, data were gathered from a single secondary teacher education cohort composed of 16 women and four men over the course of a semester and one half professional education course sequence. These students took virtually all of their professional course work together. All professional education courses were offered by a team of three faculty, including two of the authors, Wentworth and Hansen who also supervised the students. Data came from multiple sources: Observations of teacher education classes, a student attitude survey administered at mid-program and at its conclusion, a socio-gram to identify student clique membership, a group interview conducted mid-program without the instructors being present, a "cohort life-line"1 that was sketched two months into the program in March and at its conclusion at the end of

June, and individual interviews conducted at year's end of students who had been identified as inside and outside cohort sub-groupings. The life-line involved tracing a line that represented the history of their experience in the cohort from day one and dating and describing high and low points. Data were analyzed to identify "recurring regularities" (Guba, 1978, p. 53), patterns that ran across the data. Analysis was independently conducted by the first two authors who did not participate in any formal way within the program. Analyses were compared for points of agreement and disagreements and a written interpretation was made of the data that was then criticized in writing by Wentworth and Hansen. Although substantially supporting the interpretation, a few adjustments were made, the most important of which related to instructor and program aims.

Our intention in this paper is to deepen understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of cohorts *primarily from the teacher education students' perspectives*. As we began data analysis, particularly the life-lines, we quickly recognized the power of what can best be described as the "rhythm of schooling." The point is an important one: Cohorts and students' experience within them seem to evolve in relationship to their experience with pupils in the schools in which they work. As their in-school experience changes, and these changes must be seen in relationship to a wide range of personal-life issues, so do their perceptions of personal and program strengths and weaknesses. The importance of in-school experience to understanding student perceptions of their cohort experience has profound implications for researchers who wish to make sense of cohorts.

Secondary Teacher Education Program Context

Twenty students, all in their early 20s, were organized into a cohort for one and one-half semesters. Together they were enrolled in curriculum and instruction courses, an educational foundations course, a multi-cultural education course, and a variety of practica including classroom observations and assisting teachers. Early in the program they were placed in a school, and continued to work within the field throughout the program which culminated in sixteen weeks of student teaching. Students were gradually phased into student teaching, assuming two-thirds of a full-time teaching class load.

A weekly university faculty-directed seminar ran throughout the program including student teaching. Subject methods courses generally were completed prior to student teaching and were taken within the various departments throughout the university. As organized, subject methods courses had little connection to field work. When student teaching, students were supervised by multiple individuals: A person from the subject-area department, one or more of the three faculty members responsible for the cohort, a practicing teacher hired by the university to work with the cohort and a cooperating teacher.

School Rhythms and the Cohort

Given that the students were assigned to a school and classroom for field work early in the year, it is not surprising that we found a rhythm in the cohort program that paralleled the rhythm of the school year. School years are characterized by numerous beginnings and endings, each of which produces demands on teachers. A new semester, for instance, brings with it the need to get to know a new group of students, to routinize the classroom and to establish academic and behavioral expectations. In addition, there are curricular demands with new units to be designed or lessons to be organized. Endings take many forms: Finals, end of the term grades, a change in assignment, the closing of the school year. For beginning teachers, these beginnings and endings produce an emotional roller coaster that parallels the shifting demands of the school year.

But there are additional rhythms that originate in the personal lives and developmental needs of beginning teachers, generally young people with active social lives. For instance, April brings a heightened awareness of the upcoming need to apply for teaching positions, a first job for many. Graduation in May (certification requirements in this program were not completed until summer) is often accompanied by final papers and exams, engagement, marriage, and increased family demands as parents come to campus. Then there are the pressures associated with being a novice teacher that bring with them heightened sensitivity to a range of issues: worrying about gaining a cooperating teacher's trust, coping with the insecurity that comes from confronting one's beliefs about self-as-teacher, discovering students do not just behave appropriately in class merely because they like a teacher, and finding unanticipated gaps in one's content knowledge and knowledge of young people. These and other issues were evident in the life-lines drawn by the twenty cohort students as they would be for students within any teacher education program. But unlike other programs within which beginning teachers proceed essentially alone toward certification (the "non-programs" discussed in the first Holmes Group report), these students were linked together.

We will attempt to portray the rhythms. Prior to beginning student teaching most of the students spent a few weeks observing in their cooperating teacher's classroom. Cohort assignments sought to focus their attention productively. Nearly all student teachers reported this as a time of great confidence and excitement, echoes of the "fantasy stage" of learning to teach (Ryan, 1986). Gradually, however, many became frustrated at having to wait to teach. For many, this period was followed by two or three weeks of team teaching with the cooperating teachers—part of a gradual induction into the classroom and into the responsibilities of teaching. Many experienced this period as one of great stress, particularly as they sought to prove themselves as deserving their cooperating teacher's trust and respect. "Failures" (as the students judged them) were taken hard. The story to this

point is a common one, but by virtue of being a member of a cohort, the students were in a ready made and interested group with which to discuss their experiences and consider their responses.

At this early point in the program, the advantage of a cohort program over other program designs was not evident. Advantages only emerged later when the students spoke in interview or wrote on the surveys about the seminar. Although the ongoing seminar received mixed reviews, it was perceived quite early in the program as a place where beginning teachers could come together in relative safety and security to discuss their experiences and feelings about what was transpiring in the classroom and in their lives. The more difficult the challenges and the more personal the issues, the more important became the support of students within the cohort. For example, writing of week four, one student stated on her life-line: "I am *hating* student teaching, but I am confident in cohort and find out I'm not the only one [having difficulty]!" Small supportive and trusting groups quickly formed, often based on either sharing a subject area or being placed in the same school: "I notice that when me, Valerie, Ronnie, and some other girls see each other, most of the time we talk about what's going on and what our students are doing... We keep talking... We share our success stories or our really bad stories." In response to this statement made in a group interview in March, almost all the other students nodded, and one quipped, "Oh, yeah, it IS so supportive. I meet with Julie and often another girl [in the cohort]. We are either whining or telling how we solved a problem. I know who [Julie's] problem kids are and she knows who mine are. So, we talk about it." Another beginning teacher commented: "We car pool and we talk." These students were encouraged to share their problems and issues in the seminar and the conversation continued outside, especially in car pools. The support felt was uniformly appreciated but not merely because the beginning teachers realized they were not alone. They learned from one another: "I have loved the cohort and feel the...experience has made me more prepared and feel more prepared [to teach]." Another cohort member responded in interview with a specific example: "I gave her something that we did on Arabic writing. She wants to look at my unit plan, so that's good. We're both learning." And still another commented: "I can feed off their ideas and lesson plans."

Like other teacher education students, establishing friendly and productive relationships with cooperating teachers was an early and serious challenge for some cohort members. Fortunately, most quickly came to enjoy their cooperating teacher's trust which was expressed in multiple ways. Some cooperating teachers strategically withdrew from the classroom, and this was taken as a sign of trust by student teachers. Other cooperating teachers gave permission to design the curriculum as the student teacher saw fit. For those few who did not have helpful cooperating teachers, initial uncertainty persisted, often up until and through March. Recalling this period of time one student teacher wrote: "I was just surviving, but I realized others [in the cohort] were too." Of course, knowing that other members of the cohort had unhelpful cooperating teachers did not resolve the problem, but

this knowledge made the situation a little less painful. Again, cohort support emerges as a central theme.

Consistent with the early findings of Fuller (see Fuller & Bown, 1975), the time lines reflected a period of testing of self as they became increasingly responsible for teaching (for some this period included the above mentioned difficulties of working out a productive relationship with their cooperating teachers). Naive optimism of the sort described by Weinstein (1989) gave way. The beginning teachers characterized this period as one of confronting the "reality" of teaching: disinterested young people, loads of paper work, being behind in planning: "I started out believing that, 'Oh yeah, I'll be able to go in and teach and they'll love it and we'll be able to get through this beautiful lesson,' but I realized that these kids aren't motivated and don't want to do things and don't care sometimes." The confidence of some weakened during this period and their attitudes toward the cohort became a bit negative, but not for long. Confidence returned for most as the lessons they planned proved increasingly effective and as they felt themselves on more secure interpersonal ground with the pupils. Optimism returned. Being accepted, even liked, by the students was energizing, confidence building. The period that followed, lasting until near mid-April, was experienced positively as a time of growth and consolidation of early gains.

During the period of uncertainty and doubt, the seminars took on a tone of "gripe sessions" which disappointed and concerned the instructors. One beginning teacher commented this way: "They [the cohort leaders] didn't want everyone to come and just complain. So, I think they were trying to move us away from that and bring up [more] positive things." Another remarked: "The issues that we talk[ed] about are, 'this is what happened to me.' It was hard. May be we're bringing up negative situations, but I think it's really helpful [to talk about them]." To the cohort instructors, the perceived danger was that, by having the students together for an extended period of time and by engaging in protracted gripe sessions, the culture of the cohort might become dysfunctional, wholly and destructively negative. But it did not, and in part because they persisted in their efforts to contextualize beginning teacher problems and complaints and to connect them as they could to literature and ideas that offered potential for positive change. Nevertheless, this issue underscores a potential danger inherent in cohorts: They develop a culture—a life of their own—that may or may not fully facilitate the learning goals of those who design the program and teach within it.

Positive cohort learning experiences do not just happen as a matter of good luck, a happy placement, and of spending prolonged time with other teacher education students. Those responsible for teaching within them must attend carefully to building a culture that supports and sustains effective group problem solving which presents curricular and instructional issues that in some respects are unique to cohorts and which parallel the effort to create the conditions in inservice teacher education that support colloboration as an essential component of school

reform. Group problem solving was not an explicit topic of study within the cohort seminar, nor was beginning teacher development although the cohort leaders attended to developmental issues as they planned the curriculum. Both of these topics may be valuable for students to study as means for building productive cohort learning cultures particularly if the emphasis on development attends to how school context influences teacher growth.

The end of the first grading period was jolting, and many of the beginning teachers reported hitting a low on their life-lines. Grades needed to be calculated and turned in; late assignments required grading. Moreover, they had their own university work to complete. Cohort assignments and exams were due at the same time. Several of the beginning teachers complained: "working on finals, cohort assignments, teaching applications, and lesson plans is *way too much work*!" March and April were exhausting, but spring break provided a welcomed, if brief, respite, as it does for all student teachers. As one student teacher remarked, after spring break she felt "re-energized." Little compliments or kind words from students or cooperating teachers and supervisors meant a great deal during this period, a point not lost on the cohort instructors. Despite the difficulty of returning from spring break, for most, mid-April began a period of significant professional growth that continued to year's end with only brief periods of difficulty and disappointment.

This phase of the story is not unique to cohort students. However, our data suggest that rather remarkable insights about teaching began to emerge prior to spring break, and deepened as the year moved toward its conclusion: "I wanted to teach and go into a classroom and shut the door—that would be my classroom. But through the cohort program, which really stresses getting involved with other teachers and with the faculty and administration—that's really one of the main points of the cohort program—I've realized that working with other faculty is very important [to learning to teach]." These beginning teachers began to think that they were responsible for one another's professional growth, an outcome, as Howey and Zimpher (1999) argue, that ought to become a "primary emphasis in preservice teacher education" (p. 292). As they state, teacher educators must create programs so that "teachers are socialized to continue to learn with and from one another" (1999, p. 293). To this end, students formed their "own small learning community" in the words of the third Holmes Group Report, and they appeared to become more focused on their practice and, significantly, on student learning. As one student commented in interview at the end of April: "Cohort gives you an idea of community—it's collaborative, it's like a huge [professional] community." Still another remarked, "it's professional development—the cohort has given me a wider view [of what that means]."

The end of the second grading period brought problems similar to the end of the first. Yet the end of second term was experienced very differently from the first. It was year's end and while there was a great deal of work that needed to be accomplished and several of the beginning teachers said they were "burned out"

nearly all experienced a rush of energy and feelings of delight for having run the course successfully, and the fantasy returned (Ryan, 1986). "Sad to end but the students were so nice and complimenting and...summer break starts!!!" "The last week of school [was] very fun, [I received] rewarding comments from students in my yearbook." "The last day of school was one of the best days of my life!" For those who had received teaching contract offers for the next school year, there were feelings of euphoria: "I have a full-time job teaching math!!"

Conflicting Expectations and a Shared Ordeal

The cohort rhythms induced a fundamentally important conflict common to beginning teachers that influenced their university performance. When facing a clash between their responsibility in schools and the demand of their university course work, these beginning teachers opted to invest most heavily in meeting their public school obligations. Their reasons for doing so were both moral and strategic. They were moral because they believed their pupils' needs took precedence over their own. They were strategic because they believed the surest course to a positive evaluation was to please their cooperating teachers. Both reasons coalesced into a rationale used for allocating time and energy. As they assessed their responsibilities, cohort-related assignments judged most worthwhile were those deemed immediately practical and most valuable within the classroom. Survey results strongly support this view and indicate that, with rare exception, immediate applicability was the standard the students used for assessing the value of the teacher education curriculum, including the seminar and the quality of supervision. The intensity of in-school experience coupled with its extraordinary time demands may have exacerbated this tension.

It strikes us that when Lortie pointed to the need for a shared ordeal in teacher education, he likely did not have in mind quite what these students experienced. Certainly there is value in going to war together—the concept originates in war—but there are better and worse ways of going to and getting through a battle. By being so tightly bound to field work, and by the intense nature of that work, students had comparatively little time for reflection about their lives and work in the schools, which was one aim of the cohort, and even less time and energy for academic study that would support and enrich the quality of their teaching. The "here and now" dominated. Thoughtful consideration of long term implications of their educational decisions on themselves and their pupils was limited. This conclusion is supported by student comments: "Cognitive coaching is great, but it's not helping me teach right now." As we reconsider the organization of the cohort, we recognize that careful attention needs to be given to the *quality* of the ordeal students share. Some ordeals clearly are less educative than others, even miseducative. That they experienced a shared ordeal is readily evident.

Given cohort requirements and intensity and high demands upon student time,

these beginning teachers appeared to have given up any semblance of a social life. This is not surprising; it's a common student teacher complaint regardless of program structure, and it is a source of stress for some. Yet, happily, cohort membership appears to have made up for a portion of the loss as new and intimate friendships were formed: "My new friendships within the cohort have saved me!" Nevertheless, these results raise questions about: (1) the amount and kind of field work required in the program; (2) how to maintain a healthy tension between school and university expectations; and, (3) the proper balance between life and institutional rhythms and their demands.

The cohort organization expands the range of possible responses to these issues and opens up possibilities unavailable under other more traditional, individualistic, models of teacher education, models which ignore community building and are fragmented (Darling-Hammond, 1999). This study suggests that a rethinking of the nature and value of field work within the program is needed and a reconsideration of the cohort concept in relationship to its recognized but not fully realized educational potential. Lacking program conditions needed to encourage dissonance and systematic reflection, these students understood that fitting neatly into classrooms with as little disturbance as possible was their primary responsibility. The cohort does not inherently challenge this student aim. Nor do teacher educators who similarly seek to respond to the immediately pressing concerns of their teacher education students.

Our final survey results percolate with program praise. Yet some of what is praised raises additional questions. In some ways the cohort proved itself an effective means for helping students quickly and effectively fit into the school and teacher culture, as noted. Indeed, the students were virtually unanimous in praising the program's tight fit with the demands of student teaching. In this respect, they echoed the common view of certification students: theory has little value in teacher education (Gitlin, Barlow, Burbank, Kauchak & Stevens, 1999). What is important, is "doing." This finding concerns us. Yet, it is tempered by additional data that suggest these beginning teachers were not openly anti-theoretical, hostile to research and the conclusions generated by researchers. Rather, given the skills orientation of the curriculum and the students' strong bias in favor of an apprenticeship model of learning to teach, they simply dismissed researcher-generated knowledge. We conclude that the students were not rejecting this kind of knowledge; rather they found it irrelevant in the form in which they encountered it in seminar and as they sought to manage the rhythms of schooling.

Given their perceptions, it is not surprising that when the students described changes made in their thinking as a result of the program they immediately referred to teaching strategies they had been taught and ideas they gleaned and effectively used in the classroom: "[The instructors] introduced Glasser methods. I was so skeptical at first because my techniques were working just fine. As an assignment they asked us to specifically use it and write about our experience with it. First time

I used it, I felt so awkward. As I continued to try to use it, I noticed that it not only changed their behavior but it maintained it, because responsibility had been placed on them. I [struggled] making that change." While most learned that teaching is "hard," the program confirmed the value of loving children, the belief that they are good teachers, that teaching is a "great responsibility" and that it is "fun." The program did *not* challenge their conceptions of teaching as skill mastery coupled with love of children. In two cases, however, students did find that the time spent in the schools changed them fundamentally. But these changes had to do mostly with recognizing that they had a great deal to learn about teaching. Teaching had humbled them.

Considering the Results

To challenge traditional conceptions of teaching requires a reconsideration of the aims and means of teacher education and not just a shift in program structure. After all, one can think of the professional community that these beginning teachers recognized as valuable as potentially having multiple and sometimes even conflicting purposes. As we consider our findings, we conclude that less emphasis must be placed on making a smooth transition into schools and more on identifying and exploring origins of tension between beginning teacher beliefs—their personal theories about self, teaching and learning—and the institutional demands placed on them (Bullough, 1997a). For the sake of children, teachers must become students of their own practice. Cohorts may offer rich opportunities for accomplishing this aim including peer observation along with the formal study of practice through group action research projects. As Darling-Hammond (1999) convincingly argues, "teacher learning is a lynch pin of school reform" (p. 229). Learning to teach requires confrontation with self and with the school context in the quest not merely to become more proficient in the skills of teaching but more knowledgeable about students and about how to shape educational environments that support and sustain both student and teacher development. Thus, the aim of *training* teachers, of fitting them neatly into schools, needs to be situated alongside an equally powerful aim of *educating* them. To this end, careful attention needs to be given to providing means that support beginning teacher reflection on practice, including time to think. Program intensity may originate from numerous sources, miseducative and educative: running like mad to meet deadlines as well as working like mad to better understand a problem or an issue.

According to the students in our study, the greatest value of the cohort program—excluding the experience of student teaching—was found in the kind and quality of relationships established among the beginning teachers: "We're peers and pretty much we became friends. It is more than just a professional relationship... We are friends, so we talk about our problems and work through them [together]." "Well," another commented, "I feel like the cohort is a community of learning... Each person is building each person up." Another remarked: "I really do

feel really strongly about the people that I teach with. They are very, very, very helpful. We joke a lot together.... We have grown close together knowing that we are all in the same boat and that we are all having a hard time." "Well, among my peers, I've had a lot of good discussions with a lot of them. You know, not just in my subject, not just in my school. I do interact with a lot of them and a lot come to me for advice." "The support [from my peers] has been my sanity." Statements like these confirm the value of the cohort as a support system and as a tool for building powerful and positive shared ordeals. There is less evidence that the relationships had a strong intellectual as contrasted to emotional content, although sharing of lesson plans probably counts as an intellectual exchange. Mostly, it appears that the students helped one another get through, around, or over problems, gave encouragement and shared strategies that "worked." Given the stresses under which students worked throughout their time in the schools, perhaps this outcome should have been anticipated.

Our data revealed one result that tempers our judgement of student praise of cohort support. In the interviews conducted by the first two authors, we used the word "cohort" to mean a group of students who shared a professional and personal set of commitments centering on caring for and nurturing the intellectual, moral, and spiritual lives of children and that included a willingness to invest in other teachers' development. As we have seen, in some ways the later part of this definition was event in how the students thought about their responsibilities to peers. However, the beginning teachers had a vague and limited sense of the first part of the definition, which again raises questions about program aims and beginning teacher socialization.

Most of the preservice teachers thought of the cohort simply as a group of people who meet "together to learn how to be better teachers." We discovered that the group to which most referred was not the entire cohort membership. Instead, individuals thought of themselves as members of one or two subgroups, a content area grouping and a school-based grouping, and these groups were influential. Thus, they may have understood their responsibility to assist one another learn to teach somewhat narrowly. Students of mathematics thought of themselves first as beginning math teachers, then as members of a group located in a specific school, and lastly as math teachers across schools. As Radencich et. al (1998) suggest, cliquishness within cohorts is a danger that may actually undermine some of their educational potential. As data from the socio-grams suggest, it was within these relatively narrow groupings that friendship bonds grew most intense and within which most direct assistance was given. When leadership emerged, it was within these sub-groupings. And it was within them that most of the beginning teachers found emotional support to complement the considerable support offered by spouses or family members, and not from their cooperating teachers or supervisors. This said, when assistance was needed with a specific teaching-related issue, they turned first to their cooperating teacher.

Disciplinary cultures differ (Shuell, 1992). Indeed, the cohort experience likely confirmed the subject matter subcultures with which the beginning teachers entered teacher education and through which they came to understand teaching and learning. The implications of this discovery may be important, representing a weakening not only of the educational potential of the cohort that we believe partially resides in the persistent confrontation of disciplinary differences, but of the shared ordeal associated with it. Further, we suspect that the likely result of this pattern of beginning teacher interaction represents an overly narrow conception of professionalism, a conception that plays to disciplinary prejudices and inherent patterns of institutional elitism among secondary school subject area departments. Minimally, this view suggests that the second part of our definition of a cohort, that associated with community building, needs clarification, enhancement, and direct programmatic attention.

Had this issue been anticipated, the instructors may have altered school placements to make certain that each site had students working in multiple disciplines. Then, the curriculum could have been planned to assure that students engaged in activities that cut across subject areas as well as across school placements. Without adjustments of this kind, it is unlikely that students will exit the program with as lively a sense of the value and importance of cross-disciplary interaction to teacher learning and school improvement as they should have. Again, questions are raised about the nature of the shared ordeal these students experienced.

Conclusion

Our evidence 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. We also have noted some problems and potential dangers. What is clear is that although the cohort organization has great educative potential, this potential is not realized simply by administratively shuffling of students into groups and of placing groups in sequenced courses and within schools. The culture of training, so common to teacher education programs, students and, we suspect, professors, is not necessarily altered by a cohort organization, at least not by one that lasts for only seven months like ours. To maximize the educational value of cohorts requires consideration of how beginning teachers develop and how they spend their time so that a cohort is not just a matter of rushing through a traditional program as a group–which certainly does have some value—but of proceeding through a different kind of program, one grounded differently, in a commitment to fully exploiting the educational power of group problem solving for the benefit of each of its members. It is for this reason that we think student cliquishness of the cohort is a problem. Strong cliquishness—the creation of in and out groups—limits the resources that can be brought to bear to ameliorate problems while also limiting

interaction across disciplinary boundaries that might lead to broader and enriched conceptions of teacher development and professionalism.

Structural changes to teacher education like a cohort organization must be complemented by efforts to alter common-sense conceptions of teaching, that include the expectation of teacher isolation, and of teacher education held by teacher educators and teacher education students alike. As long as time in the field practicing teaching is considered the sine qua non of teacher education, as it currently is, the educational value of a cohort is bound to be unnecessarily limited. One conclusion is certain: With the support of teachers and teacher educators, a cohort of teacher education students has the potential power to do what the individual student teacher can rarely do: Learn about and respond to the rhythm of schooling from a position of relative strength and without being overwhelmed by it.

Note

For the life line, students were given a sheet of paper with the following directions written at the top.

Name: (will be kept confidential)_____ Date_____

Create a **Cohort Life Line**. Turn this sheet [of paper] on its side and use the back if needed. Focus on your experience in the cohort. Start the line with the beginning of the cohort and take it to the present. Note high and low points. Date each high and low point as you can, label each, and in a sentence of two state what transpired at the time to produce a high or a low point.

Start Here

X

After the sheet was passed out, and the assignment modeled on the chalk board, the students began creating the lines.

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