

## **Relationships in Preservice Teacher Preparation: From Cohorts to Communities**

**By Jan Dinsmore & Kerri Wenger**

The cohort seemed like a little family, with all of the group building activities, songs, projects, field trips, and even our gatherings out of class at the Fiesta restaurant! It made a comfortable environment to learn in. I think of our community in our program as I teach this year and try to create the same environment for my kids. (Mandy, 2/17/00)

Recent research in teacher preparation indicates that learning is enhanced through a sense of community (Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000). In some teacher preparation programs, the cohort structure has been shown to model community building within the teacher socialization process (Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris, & Watson, 1998; Koeppen, et al., 2000). A sense of community encouraged in cohort structures can foster learning and discourage the intellectual and professional isolation of teachers (Comer, 1996; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Goodlad, 1994; Koeppen, et al., 2000; Tinto, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994). A sizeable body of research exists on cohort groups in graduate programs, especially in educational administration (Hill, 1992; Wenzlaff & Wieseman, 2004). However, there is a lack of research investigating cohort models at the undergraduate level. How do undergraduate students perceive their learning in a cohort program? What features of a cohort-model program can teacher educators use to support preservice teachers' emerging understanding of their practice?

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### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this qualitative case study was to explore the preservice teachers' perceptions about their own learning within the culture of a branch-campus, cohort-model teacher preparation program and through their first year of teaching. Specifically, what did these students perceive as important factors which contributed to their learning? The program, Riverside, was in its first year of existence at a branch campus in a small town in rural Oregon during the 1998-1999 school year, with a newly hired elementary education generalist as the site coordinator and main instructor. As with many new programs, there were many challenges. The need for the study surfaced as the coordinator of the program attempted to meet the individual needs of the students, coordinate with the university's main campus 115 miles away, and ensure quality of the program at this site.

Within this context, then, this two-year study investigated how a cohort of twelve preservice teachers—many of whom were nontraditional-aged students, unable to relocate from their rural communities, and inexperienced with higher education—experienced their branch-campus, cohort teacher preparation program. This study was guided by two primary questions: (1) How did preservice teachers characterize their cohort community as a vehicle for their own learning about teaching? and (2) How did this sense of community influence how new teachers taught their first year in area schools?

### **Theoretical Foundations**

#### ***Cohorts as Culture***

Researchers suggest that schools act as cultural enterprises where members learn to act and talk together in socially acceptable ways (Cazden, 1988; Spindler & Spindler, 1992). In this study, the cohort was viewed as a culture where teacher socialization takes place, both in the university classroom and in the field experience site (Geertz, 1973; Ross, 1998; Su, 1992).

If we view the cohort as an evolving cultural entity, we can identify at least three vital aspects which influence the culture in each particular cohort group: the concept of cohort model; particular context and location; and the beliefs that participants hold about the community or are encouraged to adopt. Central to teacher learning are the aspects of prior knowledge that preservice students bring to the program, peer interactions while learning, and faculty support (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2001; Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Cohorts create the structural opportunity to maximize and create a community minded culture that supports these central tenets of teacher learning.

As the cohort in this study was examined as a culture, three areas of teacher preparation research informed the ongoing analysis. The first area of research describes the educational theories supporting social interaction in *cohort-models*.

The second area focuses on the learning styles and characteristics that affect the learning of *nontraditional-age students*. The third area discusses the philosophical perspectives regarding a sense of *community*. Each of these three areas of the research contribute to the understanding of the multi-faceted conditions which affect the learning of these preservice teachers in a branch-campus setting.

### **Cohort Programs**

The cohort-model, which is defined as having four or more classes together in a given semester, is designed to create learning environments based on building communities of learners. These communities are created to model the desirable attributes of teachers and relationships in schools such as collaboration and teamwork (Jackson & Leroy, 1998; Goodlad, 1994; Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Tinto, 1997). In this study the geographical isolation of the program was one additional aspect of the cohort which circumstantially bound the group together as a unit. Preservice teacher preparation programs that are implemented in cohort cycles tend to form natural learning communities due to the large number of classes that all students have together; they are a common feature of exemplary education programs (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Goodlad, 1994; Karsten, 1992; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Tinto, 1997). On the other hand, some research suggests that the lack of communities and cohorts in teacher preparation may contribute to the persisting pattern of teacher autonomy in schools (Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris & Watson, 1998). However, merely implementing the cohort structure in preservice teacher preparation may not be enough to foster a cohesive community.

### **Nontraditional-Age Student Learning as Members of a Cohort Group**

The development of positive relationships between preservice teachers and faculty has been shown to be important for the success of nontraditional-age learners in higher education (Eiffler & Potthoff, 1984; Knowles, 1998; Manos & Kassambria, 1998; Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1998). Nontraditional students are identified as those having one or more of the following four attributes: they are married, they are 25 years or older, they attend an off-campus degree-seeking program at a distance, or are nonresidential (Keller & Switzer, 1983).

Research suggests that nontraditional-age students place great value on participation in peer cohort groups to combat isolation; are learner centered, task oriented, and self initiating; view mistakes as a part of learning; are reflective, understand teaching as a developmental process and perceive themselves as needing practice (Bendixen-Noe, 1995; Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1998; Sagaria, 1989). The majority of nontraditional-age students in this study shared these attitudes toward learning and their own development as teachers.

### **Community**

Another element of successful teacher preparation programs, supported by the

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research on student persistence, is academic and social integration through communities of learners (Tinto, 1997). A basic human need exists to achieve, to belong, and to feel significant (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). By using “responsive teaching techniques” which build on students’ knowledge (Bowers & Flinders, 1990) the teacher, in this case the university instructor, can balance the power by focusing on collaboration and negotiation. This collaboration can create a safe, non-threatening atmosphere (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). A community-minded learning environment in teacher preparation programs can satisfy this need and frame a pattern for the classroom climate of these future teachers.

Community is illuminated in the development of positive relationships and interactions within a cohort of students (Higgins, 1999; Prawat, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1994). Students involved in positive relationships in learning communities spend more time studying together and learning from each other (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994). Broadly described, these shared learning experiences can lead to three main benefits. First, the cohorts form their own supportive peer groups. Second, the students become more actively involved in their cooperative learning (Goodlad, 1994; Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000; Noddings, 1992; Tinto, 1998). Third, the more time students spend learning together, the more they learn, in this case, increasing their knowledge of teaching and learning (Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000; Tinto, 1998). Studies indicate that the creation of communities promote collaborative learning experiences which provide the academic and social support to foster learning (Comer et al., 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Throughout preservice teacher preparation the process of teacher socialization begins. What teachers learn is influenced in both the university teacher preparation program and the field experience and continues into the commencement of teaching careers.

### **Methods**

Throughout this two-year qualitative study, data were collected through 3 formal sets of videotaped individual (30-60 minutes each) and group interviews taken in December 1998 (2 ½ hours), March 1999 (2 hours), and June 1999 (3 hours), which gave seventeen hours of useable footage. In addition, weekly email responses, four different surveys, reflection statements, observations, class discussions, fieldnotes, written assignments, six formal student teaching observations and notes from informal conversations with cohort members during their preservice teacher preparation program were collected and analyzed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Additional data were collected from the first six students to be hired as teachers from this group during their first year of teaching and recorded in fieldnotes and transcriptions of videotaped interviews and emails. The data were then examined using constant comparative analysis, and provisional data categories were created (Erlandson, et al., 1993). For example,

when a participant was asked what they felt most contributed to their teacher learning, one responded, "Working with kids at the schools." This comment was coded as "Field Experience." All initial codes were examined and refined as data analysis continued in order to paint a picture of the story of the participants' learning.

An onsite colleague, who taught one course with the same students, served as a peer debriefer. This professor read initial reports of the study and was able to raise questions of bias in data interpretation as necessary. In addition, member checking, and triangulation across methods of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred on a regular basis to assure data analysis and emergent themes were accurate and credible. For example, data interpretations were taken back to the participants either on email or during interviews to confirm or correct the researchers' version of the data analysis.

By exploring a specific teacher preparation program at one particular site, there is a lack of generalizability to other sites and populations due to the unique context of the study. However, by providing a rich description of the participants, the site, and the perceptions of the preservice teachers' learning, the readers of this study may ascertain relevant information transferable to other settings.

## **Context**

The study investigated the first cohort's perspectives of their learning during the initial year of the branch campus site at Riverside during 1998-1999. The preservice teachers in this cohort had lobbied intensively for the creation of a branch campus program at the Riverside site so that they could pursue their certification without moving away from their families. They were deeply committed and dedicated students who wanted to be exceptional teachers. What came to be an overriding concern of the coordinator/researcher and the students was addressing the unique challenges these largely nontraditional preservice teachers faced as they balanced the demands of an intense course of college classes required for their teacher certification with the sometimes stressful realities of their full lives.

## **Researcher's Role**

It is important to describe the complex role of the site coordinator at Riverside, because the site coordinator, Dana, was also the primary researcher. At this branch campus site, the coordinator takes on the roles of methods instructor, teaching at least 34 required education credits throughout the year. The coordinator also serves as advisor and supervisor, and acts as a link between the elementary schools and the university. In addition, the coordinator acts as a liaison between the students and the university's college of education, the business and financial aid offices, the registrar, the community college, and other faculty. The many responsibilities of the coordinator create an essential connection between the students and herself.

It is important to note the aspect of self-as-instrument, that the researcher's

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character is embedded within the research (Henry, 1993). The dual role as researcher and site coordinator had the potential to inhibit the participants' honesty when responding to interviews and questionnaires. However, the content of the interviews was not related to graded class assignments, nor was participation in the interviews mandatory. The interviews were entirely voluntary and participants were willing to share their expertise and opinions to help improve their own learning and potentially improve teacher preparation at this site. In addition, interviews, and surveys submitted anonymously during participants first year of teaching, confirmed initial data collected during the program. One of the assumptions was that a self-study of this new teacher preparation program through the eyes of the participants could contribute to the success and improvement of the program and "bridge the gap between the academician and the practitioner" (Henry, 1998).

#### **Dana**

The site coordinator and primary instructor, also known as the core leader, was newly hired at the university, in her first full-time faculty position as she was completing her doctorate. Prior to this point Dana had been an elementary teacher at various grade levels for 11 years; therefore she was well versed in the art of wearing more than one hat, as elementary teachers must be. Being fresh out of the classroom, the coordinator's recent elementary teaching experience helped her balance the multifaceted aspects of the position. This does not mean that the job was an easy one; the workload was daunting, especially for someone new to the field. However, Dana was knowledgeable about the complex intricacies of teaching to meet diverse learners' needs and the knowledge of what teachers really need to know in order to thrive in the classroom.

In view of the fact that an equivalent cohort-model preservice teacher preparation program was being implemented at the main campus, strong collegial collaboration was in place with biweekly phone conferences and biannual "retreats" with all teaching faculty and program coordinators of the different sites to share ideas, solve problems, collaborate on syllabi, and alter curriculum. The administration, especially the Dean, was strongly supportive of the branch campus programs. This strong support and collaboration at this branch-campus site created the necessary scaffolding and environment to implement the program.

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study include the 12 preservice teachers in the 1998-1999 Riverside cohort. This cohort of twelve students, eleven female, one male, had an average age of 28.5, three years of college experience, and a variety of previous job experience; and all but one had discontinued employment upon entering the program. These students worked closely together for at least 30 hours each week during their final year at Riverside.

### **The Riverside Cohort Model**

The preservice teacher preparation program at Riverside consists of a year-long, three-term course of study which mirrors the main campus program. Core I and Core II are both 11-week, 18-credit blocks of university classes rich in field experiences, with early childhood pre-K through grade 6 learning environments. Core I focuses on early childhood through grade 3, while Core II focuses on the elementary grades 3-6. Core III is student teaching and requires a minimum of 10 weeks. Upon successful completion of this program and passing scores on the state required tests, the students may apply for their teaching license and are qualified to teach grades K-8 in an elementary setting. Within this program, the two regular onsite faculty, Dana and Martha, set the tone for the learning environment.

### **Community Building**

In the context of this cohort, community-building activities were built into the curriculum and implemented on a daily basis. Examples of experiences that were used to build community and the sense of a common purpose were daily songs, cooperative- learning strategies, ice breakers, games, jigsaws, and “energizers” (simple activities to renew energy levels and apply creative-thinking skills while allowing time for reflection). Students often took turns leading or teaching new songs. Group projects, both short and in-depth, as well as group presentations were also requirements of the classes. In addition, there was time built into courses, called “house cleaning,” where problems, concerns, and questions about schedules or assignments were discussed to keep students’ stress levels down. Community-building activities became an important feature outside the classroom as well. Students met as study groups in each others’ homes. Often, the entire cohort gathered at a local Mexican restaurant with site instructors for “casual social” sessions. Additional inadvertent community builders were the three videotaped group interviews conducted the purpose of data collection which, through the process of conversation and dialogue, built rapport and gave the students an additional forum for discussing their thoughts, opinions, and concerns with the core leader.

### **Data Analysis**

Three main recurrent themes emerged through the data analysis as important factors contributing to the students’ learning within this cohort model: *field experience relationships, peer relationships, and instructor relationships*. The data is interpreted through these three coding categories, which describe the students’ perceptions of essential factors that contributed to their learning as the cultural community evolved. These kinds of relationships can be considered the foundation that paved the way for the students’ learning on their educational path to becoming a teacher.

By using a constant comparative format, the researchers were open to new

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avenues for information and further questions arose guiding ongoing observations and interviews where the findings were compared to the originals and refined (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, students consistently stated that field experience was important to their teacher learning. However, when a negative example arose within a category, such as a specific time when field experience did not foster learning, additional questions were added to the following interview in an attempt to understand and accurately interpret this contrasting data. What came to be of special significance then, were these negative comments classified within the three coding categories. In the aforementioned example, the negative comment would be one which was categorized as *field experience*, but actually hindered rather than fostered learning. A breakdown of the representative comments and percentages of positive or negative statements is illustrated in Table 1. The profound influence of social relationships within the categories becomes apparent as we examine each in turn.

#### ***Field Experience Relationships***

The first theme that emerged from the transcripts and fieldnotes as a significant factor that contributed to the students' learning was the category of field experience, more specifically the relationships within these field experiences. These field experiences included going into the schools and teaching nine lessons to small groups of children during both Core I and Core II at a partner elementary school. Mandy, in her first year of teaching, described how she felt she learned best:

Definitely the experiences in the practicum. I think my learning style goes back to the old prophecy where it says something like "I do and I remember." I do not remember a whole lot of the readings that we did, or even a lot of the research projects, but I do remember my ideas that worked well with the different ages of students, and I do value those experiences more than any others.

Connie echoed those sentiments:

The most valuable part of the program was the hands-on in the actual classrooms. In the September practicum, most of us never taught, we were kind of like aides. I was really nervous before my first lesson because I wasn't sure if I could really teach. After teaching a lesson to a group of kids and it went O.K. I thought oh, so this is what they were talking about in the text . . . that's how it works.

The learning that Connie and Mandy describe refers specifically to their relationships with elementary students during their field experience. Building strong collaborative relationships with cooperating teachers were also viewed as important, as Goodlad (1990) has found. During Core I, Diana worked with a fourth-grade teacher and four other students in one classroom. She describes the importance of those relationships in the field experience in terms of her own improvement as a teacher:

My teacher was really helpful—just her openness to our ideas and her enthusiasm



**Table 1**  
**Categories and Representative Quotes**

Category	Type of Comment Positive/ Negative	Representative Quote From Students	% of respon- ses	Total Number of Total Statements (1302)
Field Experience Relationships	Positive Supports learning	Definitely the experiences in the practicum. I think my learning style goes back to the old prophecy where it says something like “I do and I remember.”	66%	391 (30% of all statements)
Field Experience Relationships	Negative Inhibited learning	I’m glad to be working with kids in a real school, but I feel like an intruder in the classroom. I mean, I don’t think the teacher really wants me there.	34%	391
Peer Relationships	Positive Supports learning	I learn so much from interacting with these guys. Our discussions in class are great and so are our brainstorming sessions.... kids learn better in a safe environment. I think that is true for adults too.	63%	484 (37% of all statements)
Peer Relationships	Negative Inhibited learning	I know that many members of the group don’t like me. I can tell that I annoy them. I’m trying to be a part of the group but it’s not working....	37%	484
Instructor Relationships	Positive Supports learning	I think I learned best by the individual instruction we received from being a small class. When I had a problem, or was having difficulty with my lessons, I was able to meet with you either after class, on the phone, in your office or at Fiesta and we could brainstorm possible solutions.	80%	427 (33% of all statements)
Instructor Relationships	Negative Inhibited learning	I don’t like not being able to talk to the management teacher. I have no idea where I stand in the class. . . discussion is out of the question with Ednet.	20%	427

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for teaching. She shared her resources and offered suggestions before and after our lessons. I really think she was a great mentor. I hope that I can help a future teacher when I'm teaching just like she has. I don't think the experience would have been as good without her support and feedback.

These statements are not surprising; in fact, 66% of all statements coded as field experience relationships describe the importance of learning from their cooperating teacher. However, not all experiences in the field were as beneficial as others. The following comments portray some of the negative aspects of cohort members' field experiences. Karen states:

I'm glad to be working with kids in a real school, but I feel like an intruder in the classroom. I mean, I don't think the teacher really wants me there.

Connie had some of the same negative interaction within her field experience:

I love trying my lessons out with the kids but the secretary acts like we are pains in the butt to have around. She is short with us. The other day when I told her I needed to make copies, she said that the copier was only for teachers. Doesn't she realize we are all working here, teaching the kids?

These statements are just a small illustration of the numerous examples representative of the cohort members' feelings of the importance of their field experience, their expectations for learning and their need for a sense of belonging to the profession of teachers during their teacher preparation program. The social interactions with peers and cooperating teachers that take place as a part of the school practicum, had both positive and negative impressions on their experience. While all felt the practicum experience of teaching children was very important, their contrasting comments suggest that other factors influenced the quality of relationships within the experience. Students stated that negative relationships within the practicum actually hindered their preservice teachers' learning while positive relationships enhanced learning. This suggests that field experience itself may not be the most important contributing factor to preservice teacher learning but rather it is the positive relationships within the experience which have a significant influence on learning.

### ***Peer Relationships***

Peer relationships, the second theme contributing to the students' learning, was in part, due to the cohort model program. The structure of the cohort naturally created an environment to learn with their peers. These preservice teachers got to know each other very well; they spent many hours each day together. Whereas many students had felt isolated while taking other coursework prior to and outside of the program, as members of the cohort, they began to learn more through discussions with their other cohort members during and outside of cohort classes. Diana identifies the importance of the sense of community within the cohort:

I learn so much from interacting with these guys. Our discussions in class are great and so are our brainstorming sessions. I think part of it is that I know that what I say they listen to me and, I guess “respect” my thoughts. That makes it safe. We read somewhere that kids learn better in a safe environment. I think that is true for adults too. I know it is for me.

Students of the cohort in this study expressed a strong connection to others within the group. These connections were fostered in informal social situations as well as in class. For example, Michelle describes the support her peers gave her during the program which contributed to her learning:

I couldn't complete this program unless I could bring my baby to class. Everyone takes turns holding him. He has a lot of aunts here. Even when we meet at other people's houses to study, I bring him since I'm nursing. I have lots of good babysitters here. He will be Riverside's youngest graduate! It will be fun for everyone to see him grow up. Like when we are all in our Master's program.

She added that she didn't know if she would have been as successful in a different program without the sense of belonging and relationships she had with her peers.

Having a baby in class definitely created a unique situation. The students were concerned if he was ill and often offered advice for the new mom. The support and acceptance that the students gave Michelle and her infant son, she felt, enabled her to complete the program. These statements give the reader an idea of the sense of family within the group. The social interactions took place when groups of students left campus to eat lunch together, or during social breaks, road trips, traveling to a city nearby with a large university to take additional classes together in the summers and as a part of student teaching.

When reflecting about significant influences in their learning, cohort members often mentioned the positive consequence of working in groups, getting to know each other's strengths, as well as learning with and from others who were working toward the same goal. Karen stated: “I love the feedback I get when I throw out an idea to the group. It really raises the bar and makes me think — how would this work with kids? I really miss that now that I'm doing my student teaching.”

Other cohort members also described a reliance on others for feedback on ideas when asked about factors which contributed to their learning. Early in the study, Dana and Martha thought feedback might be a coding category. However further analysis of the data demonstrated that feedback is more of a subcategory, embedded within relationships within all three coding categories. For example, Renee commented on the importance of peer feedback to help her reach a higher level of performance:

I'm forever calling up Kary, Evan, or Karen to run an idea past them. Or if I'm not sure I understand the assignment then I ask them. I really didn't do that in other college classes. I think it is the comfort level with this group. They are great sounding boards for ideas when I'm at the half-baked stage and not sure what I have in mind will really work. I'm learning more by being able to run things by my buddies.

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This sense of trust and reliance within the cohort was described by each of the members as contributing to their success. Mandy reflected on how this trust was built:

You know what I think has made a huge difference in how the group interacts are all of the community building things we do every day. The songs we sing, the acting, the aesthetic stuff like “yellow makes me feel”, all of these activities can be used with kids to create a close-knit community. The amazing thing is that they really helped us as a group of big kids learn to work together a little better. It gave me a better understanding of their dynamics in a learning environment

When there was a problem, in one case (a particular student was acting very “noncommunitylike”), we discussed as a group what we as adult learners needed in order to learn. We agreed on our norms, for our classroom and the students agreed that the environment was much better after our class meeting.

There is much research to support the importance of cohorts to enhance preservice teacher preparation (Eiffler & Potthoff, 1998; Goodlad, 1994; Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000). However, the data suggest that the social interactions and relationships within the cohort need to foster a community spirit in order to enhance learning. A clear distinction was made between positive and negative relationships which occurred within the cohort. While some interaction fostered learning, other interactions seemed to inhibit it.

Positive social interactions are believed to encourage collegial relationships during teaching and create bonds and collegial relationships. Karen, a first year teacher, commented on the relationships of the cohort members:

You know there were a lot of things that I know really helped me to become a good teacher. But the thing that stands out in my mind is the bond we had in the cohort. It was a love/hate relationship at times. But that was really meaningful and helped me to develop as a person. We all depended on each other. More people should have an opportunity to experience a cohort. We were a community.

While 63 percent of the peer-relationship statements demonstrated a cohesiveness within the cohort, nearly 37 percent of all peer-relationship statements described what inhibited the learning of these preservice teachers due to peer “actions”. These contrasting remarks demonstrated that all was not perfect in paradise. Instructors had to focus on cliques which formed in the cohort, which left particular members out. In addition, students stated their frustrations when other group members did not pull their own weight, meet scheduling demands or contribute to the group. Students classified such actions as things that hindered group learning. Further remarks demonstrated a lack of cohesiveness within peer-relationship statements in the context of “not fitting in.” Maureen, a single parent who was struggling financially, explained:

I know that many members of the group don’t like me. I can tell that I annoy them. I’m trying to be a part of the group but it’s not working. I even bring treats for everyone to show I’m thinking of them, but I feel really isolated. I do my part, but because of

a lack of communication or something whatever I do is just not enough. I just don't fit in with the ones who have money to burn. I'm trying but I feel really outcast. We are supposed to be a community of learners, but some people think that that concept belongs in the classroom working with kids. With everything else I have going on in my life I don't know if it's worth dealing with. I'm going to change majors.

Sadly, Maureen did leave the program. This representative comment indicates that while learning with peers is an important composition of cohorts, unless all students are a part of the community, the negative relationships within the experience may inhibit some members' learning or motivation to learn within the group.

### ***Instructor Relationships***

In this study, there were two Riverside faculty representatives on the branch campus, Martha, an adjunct faculty member and the site coordinator, Dana. Martha taught one class each term within the program. The site coordinator, Dana, taught two other prerequisite classes to the group, was their advisor, taught four classes to the group each term of the program and was their university supervisor during student teaching. All other classes were taken through a satellite system generated from the main campus. Of all statements categorized under *instructor relationship*, 80 percent indicated that a positive relationship between on-site instructors and the students in this group helped to create a unity within the cohort.

The importance of the relationships with cohort professors is the third theme that was made evident through the students' comments about social interaction. According to these students, the interaction with faculty members fostered learning and laid the foundation for strong collegial relationships during the program and continued after the graduates began their first year of teaching. For example when a first-year teacher, Kary was asked what she felt fostered her learning in the program, she stated:

I think I learned best by the individual instruction we received from being a small class. When I had a problem, or was having difficulty with my lessons, I was able to meet with you either after class, on the phone, in your office or at Fiesta and we could brainstorm possible solutions. You knew my strengths and weaknesses as well as my personality so the ideas we went over really fit my style.

Another new teacher, Renee, called Dana to her classroom during the first week of school to observe her and give advice to help her reach her difficult students. Renee used Dana's suggestion of a class meeting, which she said solved the problem and created a positive learning environment within her classroom.

Many conversations with the cohort members reflected their concern about the lack of direct communication with the four instructors at the main campus. The students verified that this delay in communication was problematic in relation to their learning. A sense of disjointedness from the main campus was expressed throughout the conversations, especially with the courses taken via Ednet. A lack of cohesiveness was perceived by the students to be caused by the lack of

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communication, interest with the campus faculty, and interaction with the campus faculty. In fact, 20 percent of all coded *instructor relationship* statements described the negative aspects of a lack of learning due to no connection or relationship with the distance education faculty. Sara remarked:

I don't like not being able to talk to the management teacher. I have no idea where I stand in the class. I'm working hard, reading everything I'm supposed to but it all hinges on a final exam since opportunity for discussion is out of the question with Ednet. We haven't even gotten our grades back from the last stuff we turned in. We just don't seem to be working together very well.

While this lack of communication and relationship with the instructors of the main campus was problematic, this distance actually served to bond the group more, as Mandy states:

I don't like being in Ednet because it seems like it's us against the main campus. They think we are some Podunk hicks from the sticks. They don't know us. You know what we are capable of! Shouldn't we all be learning from each other? Aren't we all in this together to become exemplary teachers? Well, I guess we'll have to prove ourselves worthy. We will show them!

The data suggest that the instructors helped to set the tone for a sense of belonging within the community working toward a common purpose. In effect, it was the relationship with instructors which the students attributed to helping or hindering their learning.

Data in this study indicate that the faculty was the primary force in generating a united cohort. Group activities that fostered community when implemented authentically encouraged the cohesiveness related to some cohorts. Tinto (1997) supports the importance of interaction with faculty as being crucial to student retention and success. Both formal and informal relationships are important to preservice teachers' perceptions of their learning (Koeppen et al., 2000; Su, 1992, Pupel, 1999). When this relationship was not established, as in the case of some of the instructors of the courses which were delivered via satellite, students felt less connected. In addition, there was a higher level of anxiety about their learning and their ability to meet course requirements.

### ***Creating Community as First Year Teachers***

The first-year teachers in this study made effective efforts at building relationships within their schools. Some new teachers reenacted some of the community-building activities that were used in their preservice teacher preparation program in their own classrooms, such as class meetings, energizers, and group projects. Renee took community building beyond the walls of her classroom:

Because of our cohort experience, I understand the need for community and really believe that it creates a more positive learning environment, I have tried to create this

in my classroom as a first year teacher. I didn't stop at my classroom. Because I really believe this is important, I suggested that our theme of the year for the school to be: Change the "me" to "we" in our community. I'm kind of proud of that cause that our theme for the year for the entire school!

Other students in their first year like Evan and Sara, encouraged parents to participate in their classrooms by inviting them as guest speakers and readers. Each of the six first-year teachers stated that a sense of community was crucial to their learning and the learning of their students. Mandy asserted, "I try each day to replicate the strong sense of community that I experienced with my cohort with my little first graders." Mandy accomplished this by holding class meetings and providing many group projects and team building activities. Renee began each social studies period in her middle school classes with a community builder, and focused every homeroom period on community building and inter and intra-personal skills. During an interview of these six first-year teachers, each of these teachers agreed that creating a sense of community is a very important part of their teaching and stated that when things are not going well in their classes they know it is time for a class meeting to solve problems and build community. These six first-year teachers all felt strongly connected to their peers and faculty members during their preservice teacher preparation program. They were trying to create similar connections among their students.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Teacher Education**

Throughout the study, participants repeatedly described the *power of relationships* that influence learning in a cohort. Findings from this study can help teacher educators understand nontraditional preservice teachers' perceptions of what supported their learning in a cohort-model teacher preparation program.

The data in this study suggest that cohorts must be infused with a strong sense of community to enhance the learning of nontraditional preservice teachers. Data also suggest that the program must include well-designed field experiences, opportunities for learning with cohort peers, and easy access to supportive university faculty. Finally, data suggest that the relationships *within* the field experience, with peers, and with the instructors are important to preservice teacher learning. When the relationships are negative, learning is hindered. However, when the relationships are positive, learning is enhanced.

Questions that data in this study raise include a need for examining, in detail, the processes teachers use to build community with students in different grade levels. Additional fieldwork shed light on evidence that, five years later, these former cohort members use their interpersonal relationship skills in various ways with students, with faculty, and with parents. For example, in her 5<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, Renee received the district's "Teacher of the Year" award largely due to her strong relationships with students and parents. What strategies did Renee consciously

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adopt? What aspects of her practice, perhaps unintentional or unexamined, also contributed to her relationships with students? Additional questions include: How can these teachers be supported in their efforts? Are they, in turn, mentoring others in their rural schools to build on strong relationships?

Mandy, in her first year of teaching, summed up the importance of these relationships:

Building a strong community is so important. I know that the positive relationships that were established throughout my teacher ed. program helped me become the teacher that I am today. I think we have learned by living this program what community building is. You can tell right away if someone isn't really being a cohesive unit of the cohort. When someone isn't working with the group, it causes negative feelings within the group. I can see how this can happen in my own classroom. If we know what should be done in schools, we know it works because it even worked with us as adults, then why isn't it being done nationwide?

Why not indeed? Schools of education need to create learning environments within preservice teacher preparation programs that model strong relationships between teachers and students, so future teachers will foster those learning relationships in their own schools.

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