

Field Experiences in A Community of Teachers

The fieldwork component of **A Community of Teachers (CoT)** functions in a very different manner than it does in most programs. The process was designed as an integral part of the program in 1992. Several classroom teachers were standing members of the design team.

When a person joins the program, he begins visiting schools, searching for a Mentor Teacher. When he finds that person he works continuously with her for at least one day each week. Once the teacher candidate is eligible to student teach he also does that with his Mentor Teacher. This design has evolved over time into a framework with the following features:

- **Criteria for Mentor Selection.** Our teacher candidates individually establish their own criteria. We ask them to look for a teacher in their teaching area whom they respect enough to want to apprentice themselves to that person. They take the job quite seriously. We've seen a teacher candidate drop a teacher she had been considering when the teacher casually referred to her "dumb kids." That was all it took for that teacher candidate. We've had to install a rule, through our one person-one vote governance process, that limits the search for a Mentor to two semesters or one must go on sabbatical to curtail the practices of some teacher candidates taking longer than that. It is during the Mentor search that our teacher candidates experience a variety of school settings. We ask them to look at both middle and high schools in rural, suburban, and urban settings. We have working relationships with about 50 schools, and teacher candidates are developing new connections all the time, searching in schools as distant as Noblesville, Columbus, Princeton, and Terre Haute.
- **Preparation of Mentors.** We have had no formal training thus far. We start the relationship with a three-way meeting of the Seminar leader, the Apprentice, and the Mentor Teacher at which the processes of the program are described and everyone shares his or her expectations for the whole experience. Relationships are negotiated (e.g., who will be called by a first name in what context?). We are now beginning to train Mentors to evaluate their Apprentices' Portfolios.
- **Role of Mentors Throughout CoT, Evaluation of Apprentices, Portfolio Review.** CoT attempts to accomplish a dualism. We want our teacher candidates to be able to function effectively in schools as they are, but we also want them to be uncomfortable enough with current school practices that they are ready to be a part of efforts to change them. We attempt to accomplish the latter piece of this dualism by placing teacher candidates in an environment on campus that emulates many of the best practices of the most interesting new schools "out there." Our Mentor Teachers are the key agents in accomplishing the former portion of the dualism. They do it *so* much better than we can, particularly when the teacher candidate has hand-picked that teacher to perform that very task.

Mentor Teachers are considered a part of our community; they're welcome at seminar sessions whenever they'd like to come and we sometimes directly invite them. Teacher candidates in each seminar typically hold a thank you dinner for their Mentor Teachers each year. In response to new **IPSB** licensing requirements, we are now involving our Mentor Teachers in the final evaluation of each teacher candidate's Portfolio. We'll pay them \$200 through our Title II grant to perform this task (\$100 for the evaluation, \$100 for participating in a pilot study of this new practice). If these new procedures prove to be workable, we'll then seek a mechanism to continue paying Mentor Teachers the \$100 honorarium on a hard money basis. We currently have the funds, through our grant, for a training session to prepare them for this evaluation. We have already used grant money to print copies of our Expectation Guidelines for all Mentor Teachers so that the criteria for judging the portfolio are available to them.

1. **Teacher Involvement in the Design.** One explanation for CoT's unusual design is that classroom

teachers and teacher candidates were equal partners in its design, just as they were in the design of the program. Because we could not pay them for their work with our teacher candidates we wanted to be sure that the role held high intrinsic value for them. Teacher candidates on the design team saw their fieldwork as a critical part of the program, too critical for their placement to be left to chance. They wanted to seek their own Mentors. Classroom teachers wanted to end the steady stream of strangers coming through their classroom. It went without saying that they would welcome having a choice in whom they worked with. Our faculty favored long term relationships—an apprenticeship—in which teacher candidates could build trust and thereby more latitude in the responsibilities they could shoulder. Both parties would have to want to work with each other if the relationship was long, and we wanted it to last through student teaching.

2. **How the Apprenticeship Reflects the SoE's Six Guiding Principles.** We see the apprenticeship as the central activity that prepares our teacher candidates to function effectively in schools, as they are now structured. The key Guiding Principles that are addressed in the process of CoT's apprenticeship are:
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 2.1:* Has social and educational visions that are connected to reflective practice.
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 3.2:* Appreciates the complexity of teaching & learning.
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 4.1:* Has observed and worked with students of varied ability levels in diverse settings.
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 5.2:* Understands how students can differ in their approaches to learning.
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 5.3:* Is sensitive to students' individual learning styles and their diversity.
 - *SOE Guiding Principle 6.1:* Assumes responsibility for own learning and continued development.
3. **Assessments and Criteria Used to Evaluate Performance.** The apprenticeship is the major setting in which our teacher candidates acquire the evidence they need to make the case that they are ready to teach. Almost all of our 30 Program Expectations have strong biases favoring evidence collected in a school, working successfully with real students. Each Expectation includes a rubric that specifies how it will be evaluated by the faculty. The field bias in these rubrics is so strong that teacher candidates can't accomplish much of the Portfolio before they establish their Apprenticeship.
4. **Opportunities for Reflection and Feedback from Peers and Teachers.** A standard element of each CoT seminar is the discussion of events which occur during teacher candidates' Apprenticeships. These discussions, which carry different names in different seminars—Crises du Jour, Notes from the Field, Round-Robin—are judged one of the most valuable features of the seminar by our teacher candidates.
5. **Opportunities to Work with Students with Exceptionalities.** About one-fourth of our teacher candidates are special education majors. They obviously have extensive opportunities to work with students with exceptionalities. By design, they are distributed fairly equally through all CoT Seminars. They bring their experiences into seminar discussions. They also invite their colleagues to join them in their apprenticeship settings. All of our teacher candidates are required to build evidence in several Expectations that encourage them to broaden their contacts in their schools even if their day-to-day work does not bring them in contact with students with exceptionalities.