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ABSTRACT

Five beginning elementary teachers met weekly with a mentor in a group in order to support one another, discuss their experiences, view each others' videotaped lessons, and learn how to become reflective practitioners. At the beginning of the year, the teachers most valued the emotional support and understanding they received through group participation. Throughout the school year, participants experimented with and incorporated new ideas in their classrooms as a result of watching other teachers' lessons and discussing their teaching with the group. Feedback from participating teachers and principals was strongly positive. This model is proposed as a way to accelerate the learning curve of new teachers and increase their longevity in the profession. Appendices include interview protocols for participating teachers and principals. (Contains 60 references.) (PB)

Reflective Practice in a Community of Beginning Teachers: Implementing the STEP Program

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ABSTRACT

Five beginning teachers met weekly with a mentor in a group to support one another, dialogue, view each other's videotaped lessons, and learn how to become reflective practitioners. At the beginning of the year, the teachers most valued the emotional support and understanding they received from the other teachers. Throughout the school year, the teachers experimented with and incorporated ideas into their classrooms as a direct result of viewing other teachers' videotapes and discussing their teaching in the group. The model is proposed as a way to accelerate the learning curve of new teachers and increase their longevity in the profession.

Introduction

I did not think teaching was going to be so challenging, because I just went through a very challenging college and did high level work and did really well at it and just felt pretty confident that if I just worked hard, I could do it: set your mind to it and you can do it. And what I found with teaching is that it just stretches you in so many areas--it's not just in your competence in one subject or something, like in college, it's like--if you know the steps to writing a good paper or a thesis or anything, you just do it, but in this [teaching] you have organizational, you have interpersonal, you have managing your schedule, just managing your temper. There's so much involved that I never thought it was going to be that challenging.

She took my idea and then adapted it for her, and that's what STEP fosters.

These quotes from two beginning teachers illuminate two central themes in this paper: 1) beginning teachers face a truly difficult task in learning to juggle all the responsibilities and demands placed upon them; and 2) beginning teachers can and do support one another when given the opportunity to do so. While a great deal of attention in the literature is placed upon pre-service teacher education, much less attention is given to the socialization process of and difficulties faced by teachers once they begin their service in schools. Yet the transition from student teacher to experienced teacher is often fraught with pitfalls, disillusionment and burnout. The study described below documents one attempt to provide a support network for beginning teachers, in order to increase their longevity, sense of efficacy, effectiveness and morale.

Theoretical Context

Beginning Teacher Socialization

Many beginning teachers leave the profession after only a short time in the classroom. Several factors contribute to this, including the alienation and lack of support often experienced by beginning teachers (Dworkin, 1987; Fullan, 1993). Those who stay frequently must find their own means of support and help, seeking out willing colleagues, attending additional classes and workshops, or quickly settling into routines of mediocrity (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Some schools and districts have begun to provide first-year teachers with various support networks, including mentor relationships with

experienced teachers. Yet these dyads are often haphazardly structured (Fullan, 1993), and may still leave a beginning teacher isolated from the bulk of her peers.

Most teachers indicate that they would like to observe other teachers at work but rarely have that opportunity (Goodlad, 1984). Norms of isolation can make teachers suspicious or unwilling to allow others to observe their teaching, even though the positive effects of teacher collaboration and collegiality on student achievement and teacher morale have been well documented (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988b; Johnson, 1990; Little, 1982). Teaching can be a lonely and fearful experience for novices, and for those who teach in urban settings, the negative conditions of many urban schools can exacerbate an already-difficult situation, contributing to the high turnover and attrition rates of new teachers (Bruno, 1981; Dworkin, 1987).

Literature on teacher socialization and development highlights a number of findings which have implications for working with novice teachers. Beginning teachers are socialized into the profession by a variety of influences, including their classroom and students; relationships with colleagues, administrators and parents; structural influences outside the classroom; and former experiences (Jordell, 1987), but other teachers exercise the single greatest influence (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Mentors can provide beginning teachers with practical, situationally-specific help in working with students and parents, handling administrative tasks, providing instruction and dealing with the school environment (Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, & Niles, 1992), but experienced teachers are seldom prepared for such mentoring roles, nor are their schedules adjusted to allow for much time in assisting new teachers (Fullan, 1993). Group clinical supervision has been effective in developing specific teaching behaviors among pre-service teachers (Buttery & Weller, 1988), while peer assistance and peer coaching have been effective among experienced teachers (Chrisco, 1989; Raney & Robbins, 1989). There appears, however, to be little data on the effects of peer assistance among beginning teachers, or the combination of peer and mentor assistance.

The Importance of Reflective Practice

Literature regarding teacher socialization supports the need for beginning teachers to learn to reflect on their own practice (Reynolds, 1992; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987; Tremmel, 1993) and move beyond the survival stage typical of teachers at the beginning of

their career, to stabilization, experimentation and beyond (Huberman, 1989). Growth in teaching skills, including reflection, is not automatic, and often happens through colleagues (Jordell, 1987), or through direct assistance, support and encouragement from mentor relationships (Thies-Sprinthall, 1986; Wildman, et al., 1992).

Reflective practice in teaching can be facilitated in a variety of ways, including the use of journals, role-play and videotapes (Kottkamp, 1990), and in a variety of settings, including collaborative peer groups (Berkey, Curtis, Minnick, Zietlow, Campbell, & Kirschner, 1990), coach-student relationships, and practicums involving groups of teachers led by a coach or mentor (Schön, 1987). Reflection provides the opportunity to learn from experience and to be confronted with the need to abandon previous theories, so that new theories and skills can continually develop (Schön, 1983, 1987).

School Culture

However, because school culture plays a powerful role in affecting teacher relationships and the teaching environment (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), beginning teachers may never develop habits of reflection-in-action or peer collaboration, if those practices are not supported or exemplified within the school. Empirical works by Firestone and Rosenblum (1988), Little (1982), Little and McLaughlin (1993), Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993), Johnson (1990), Ashton and Webb (1986), Flinders (1988), Weiss, Cambone, and Wyeth (1992), and Poplin and Weeres (1992) have focused on: 1) the need for teachers to feel supported and respected by one another, 2) the benefits of teacher collaboration and collegiality, and 3) the negative effects of teacher isolation. Furthermore, general writings on the intractibility of school culture point to the difficulty in changing the environment, norms, beliefs, attitudes and practices which have developed in a school over time (Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1982, 1990). Thus, any study of teacher socialization must look at contextual factors such as the ways in which practices such as collaboration or reflection-in-action are encouraged in the school as a whole. It is unlikely that beginning teachers will learn such things on their own. It is much more likely that they will learn to collaborate and reflect on their practice in a professional community of inquiry.

Building Community in Schools--Building Community Among Teachers

Theory and research which considers the concept of **community**, as discussed in philosophy (Dewey, 1954; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Rousseau, 1991), psychology (McMillan &

Chavis, 1986) and sociology (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Oldenquist, 1991), also has implications for the ways in which beginning teachers are socialized, affected by the school culture around them, and able to develop a support network which goes against traditional norms of isolation and autonomy in the classroom. Educators have sought to apply one or more of these theoretical underpinnings to empirical studies (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988a; Lee, Dedrick & Smith, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1994) to describe how a sense of community or a communal form of organization can unite a school, build teacher morale, and affect student achievement. A number of studies have linked the presence of community in schools not only with positive outcomes for students (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988b; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Crawford & Aagaard, 1991; Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister, & Rogers, 1990; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), but also with positive benefits for teachers. These benefits include higher teacher morale (Bryk, et al., 1993; Johnson, 1990; Louis & Miles, 1990; McLaughlin, 1993; Meier, 1992), a greater commitment to the school and manifestation of collegiality (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988a; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988), a greater sense of efficacy and empowerment (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Comer & Haynes, 1991), and the ability of teachers to change and improve their practice (McLaughlin, 1993). Teachers who feel empowered and committed to their school and colleagues are more likely to stay at the school for a longer period of time (Dworkin, 1987) and invest more time and energy into their teaching and relationships, thus providing even greater benefits to the students.

Research Questions:

This study thus brings together a theoretical framework from research on teachers, reflective practice, school culture, and the concept of community as it applies to schools, in order to propose a model of technical and moral support for beginning teachers. The study asks the following questions:

1) How does a weekly support group for beginning teachers affect their attitudes, teaching behaviors and practices, relationships with each other, and relationships with their students?

2) In what ways do beginning teachers in a support group learn to reflect on their practice and alter their actions as a result of this reflection? What characteristics of the support group facilitate or inhibit such reflection and experimentation?
3) How is a sense of community fostered among beginning teachers in a support group? What factors facilitate or inhibit this sense of community from developing?

Research Design and Methods

The Setting

In order to bring together the themes of community, teaching environments, and reflective practice, I participated as the facilitator/mentor of a group of five beginning teachers at a small private school located in a large inner city. During the 1994-1995 school year, I had the opportunity to examine the role of reflection on beginning teacher socialization and the development of a sense of community through my leadership of a weekly support program for these teachers, which I entitled **STEP: S**upporting **T**eachers for **E**xcellent **P**ractice. Located in the heart of a major West Coast urban center, the school where this study was conducted is a small Christian school (K-8) which serves primarily low-income Latino and African-American students. Most students qualify for a 90-95 percent tuition scholarship, paying just $35 per month to attend the school. Throughout the school's 13-year history, most of the teachers have been white and many have stayed for only one to three years. This year, over one-third of the full-time teachers were new, and four of the five new teachers had never taught before. I taught in the school from 1982 through 1990, prior to entering graduate school, and I have maintained my relationship with the school's staff, parents and students; in fact, I live on the same block where the school is located.

Description of the STEP Program and Teachers

I met with the teachers as a group two weeks before school began to discuss my ideas and solicit their suggestions for making the teacher support program beneficial to them. The principal also met with them to legitimate my role as a facilitator/mentor for them during the coming year. After school began, we met almost every week after school for 90 minutes to share concerns, review and discuss each other's videotapes, discuss a book we were reading together or a topic of interest to them. Discussion topics were

further extended through the use of interactive journal writing between each teacher and me. Throughout much of the school year, I videotaped lessons taught by each of the five teachers, met with that teacher for debriefing and critique, and then used the weekly STEP meetings for corporate viewing, analysis and critique of each videotape.

Videotaping has frequently been used for pre-service and in-service teacher training, but the particular method I used was based on the Video Microrehearsal (VMR) technique developed by Dr. Lawrence McQuerrey (1977) and used in the training and preparation of music educators. VMR has been found to be an effective feedback tool for beginning teachers. In addition, the opportunity for a group of peers to critique one another in a "safe" environment can result in a strong bonding of the group to one another--"community" develops. I hypothesized that by fostering this "safe" environment of trust, the teachers would develop a professional community of inquiry as they learned how to support one another, analyze and critique videotapes of each other's teaching, and learn together how to reflect on their own and each other's practice. By providing a forum where the teachers and I could discuss their most salient concerns as beginning teachers in light of the cross-cultural setting in which they were teaching, the existing culture and structure of the school and its surrounding community, and the larger socio-political context of the inner city, I hoped to address not only the issues surrounding beginning teaching, but also issues of culture and diversity which increasingly impact teachers in urban schools.

All five teachers are evangelical Christians and made a commitment not only to teach in the school for at least two years, but also to live in the inner-city community in which the school is located. They are white and come from middle-class homes. All had previous youth experience, including teaching Sunday school, counseling at summer camp, teaching private music lessons, and working with church youth groups. The five teachers are briefly described below.

Angie attended a small Christian college in rural Illinois, where she majored in secondary education with a social studies emphasis. She completed a teacher preparation program along with her bachelor's degree, receiving a teaching credential in social studies. Other than her student teaching, where she taught high school social studies, she had no teaching experience prior to this year, and she currently teaches sixth and seventh grade social studies.

Amy attended a small Christian college in eastern Washington, where she majored in secondary education with an English emphasis. She also completed a teacher preparation program along with her bachelor's degree, receiving a teaching credential in English. Other than her student teaching, where she taught high school English, she had not taught before, and she currently teaches sixth and seventh grade English/language arts.

Beth attended a Christian college in the Chicago area for three years, with a pre-med major, before transferring to a state university in Wisconsin, where she completed her bachelor's degree in English. She began a teacher preparation program but was unable to complete it because of a death in her family. She did not student teach nor does she have a teaching credential. She had no prior teaching experience before this year, and she currently teaches sixth grade math, science, computers and Bible.

Natalie attended an elite private college in New England, where she majored in history with a focus on Latin American studies and Romance languages. She did not enroll in a teacher preparation program and therefore has no teaching credential. She taught second grade last year at a nearby Christian school, which she described as the hardest year of her life, and she currently teaches fifth grade in a self-contained classroom.

Jen attended a small Christian college in California, where she had a diversified (liberal studies) major in preparation for her elementary teacher certification program, which she completed along with her bachelor's degree, receiving a multiple subject credential. She has completed the course work for a master's degree and clear teaching credential in elementary education (technology emphasis) from a state university in Washington. Other than her student teaching, where she taught first grade, she had no teaching experience prior to this year, and she currently teaches third grade in a self-contained classroom.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Because of the nature of the research questions I was attempting to answer, I conducted a qualitative case study by focusing primarily on the interactions and development of the teachers and their relationships with each other. The case study design was appropriate for several reasons: the process of socializing teachers and the development of a sense of community are complex phenomena, not easily separated from

their surrounding context; the focus of the study was on how community develops and how beginning teachers learn to reflect on their practice, which are both processes rather than quantitatively-measurable outcomes; and multiple sources of evidence were used (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989, 1993). Case studies are particularly appropriate when trying to answer "how" or "why" questions, and can be used to explain the forces causing the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Furthermore, a case study can help in understanding the process of developing or changing a phenomenon over time, such as the way in which beginning teachers develop over the course of a school year.

Participant Observation. I utilized four methods of data collection in this study--participant observation, interviews, document collection, and videotapes. Participant observation of the weekly STEP meetings and classrooms was a primary source of data. Participant observation enables the researcher to both participate in the activities taking place in the setting and observe those activities as they occur. This dual role implies a "many-sided and relatively long-term relationship" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 12) with those people located in the setting under study. I have kept a journal throughout the year in which I recorded my observations and impressions.

Interviews. In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews (using a tape recorder with permission) with the school principal and the five teachers in the STEP program. In qualitative research, it is not uncommon for interviews to be used in conjunction with participant observation and document analysis (see below) in an attempt to gather descriptive data from participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Yin (1989) even states that the interview is "one of the most important sources of case study information" (p. 88). Semi-structured or focused interviews are those guided by a list of questions where the interviewer still has the freedom to change the wording and order of the questions to respond to the particular situation (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989). Confidentiality was guaranteed for all interviewees. (See the Appendix for Interview Protocols.)

Document Collection. The documents which were collected included the observation forms which the teachers and I filled out as we watched each videotape, and the interactive journals which the teachers and I wrote in response to weekly topics. While documents should not be used in isolation, when their authenticity and accuracy is verified

they can be a good source of data, particularly "because they can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (Merriam, 1988, p. 109).

Videotapes. While videotaping in the teachers' classrooms was used primarily as a tool for assisting the teachers in reflecting on their practice, the videotapes also served as another source of data to be used in conjunction with the data sources mentioned above. These four sources of data collection were used in combination with one another to provide multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1989). Using multiple data sources (triangulation) and providing a chain of evidence regarding the data collection process helps to ensure the "trustworthiness" of the study (Merriam, 1988).

Data Analysis. Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, iterative process which cannot be separated from the data collection process (Merriam, 1988). Marshall and Rossman (1995) define data analysis as "the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data" (p. 111).

To facilitate data analysis, all field notes and interviews were transcribed on the computer, and a case study data base was created (Yin, 1989). This data base, including the documents and videotapes, was coded throughout the data collection process according to those themes, regularities, and patterns which related to the research questions and emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1988). Through the use of data reduction (coding) strategies and data displays, including the constant comparative method of analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), preliminary conclusions were drawn which will continue to be verified by returning to the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Emergent hypotheses are being tested and alternative explanations sought (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Preliminary Findings

Based on the literature mentioned above, as well as the findings from the VMR program, I anticipated that these beginning teachers would learn to care for, support and take responsibility for one another, both professionally and personally, resulting in the development of a caring community (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1992). Because teachers felt supported, I hypothesized, they would be able to take risks and experience positive growth in their teaching. The use of videotape and journaling would provide opportunities for

personal and corporate reflection. Furthermore, although the present study cannot determine this, I hoped that this support network might increase the longevity of the teachers both at this particular site and in their teaching career in general. Many teachers leave the profession after one or two years. However, my hope was that this kind of support network would help to ensure that these teachers stayed longer. Although the data collection process has not yet been completed, analysis to date has revealed that the STEP program has served as a vehicle for support, reflection and experimentation among the five beginning teachers.

STEPs to Support and Survival

Perhaps the primary way in which the STEP program benefited the five teachers was through the mutual support it offered them. Each week, the teachers had a place they could come to--a place where they could unload the frustrations they were experiencing, share the doubts they were facing, and report on their victories and successful experiments. Particularly in the first few months of school, the teachers needed continual reassurance that they were not weird and not failures--that the feelings and situations they encountered were normal for first-year teachers; that other teachers were facing similar feelings and situations. Even though it might have been scary to share weaknesses with the other teachers, particularly initially, as one teacher put it, "The benefit of knowing that other people could encourage me outweigh[ed] the fear that they're going to think something bad." As teachers shared their stories each week, the nodding heads and reassuring comments helped them feel understood and place the situations in perspective.

For example, one teacher came into a STEP meeting visibly upset, and in response to a question about how she was doing, she replied that she had had the worst day of her life and that her kids all hated her. After being able to share and receiving positive feedback and ideas from the other teachers, this teacher was visibly more relaxed and much calmer during the rest of the meeting. By the time she left, she was smiling and laughing with the others.

When I asked each teacher what aspect of the STEP program had been the most helpful or beneficial to them, virtually all the teachers focused on the support aspect of our times together. Here is what two teachers said about the weekly meetings:

> *Especially the first few months, just listening to other teachers--just because if I hadn't sat around talking with them, I would have assumed that every problem I had*

was unique to me, and it's not because I'm a first-year teacher but because I can't do it right, and I don't know what to do....I can just remember going in and sitting and listening and feeling the weight lift off my shoulders to hear that other people were having the same problems, and it wasn't...because I was doing things horribly wrong; it was just because I hadn't learned yet. And that just made life a lot easier, to know that I could approach other teachers about those problems without feeling intimidated because they didn't have them. Just to know that they were normal problems for first-year teachers was really good.

It was really great to have a place to go and talk...to people who were going through some of the same things and realize that I'm not the only one who's struggling, other people are having awful times [laughter]. I can see that it's true--misery does love company, I guess [laughter]. It was nice to at least know that I wasn't the only one dealing with some of those things....Having the STEP program has been great. It really has been....I can't imagine what it would have been like without that. I think I would have felt so lost and alone, but instead it's much more like a team, feeling like I'm in this with other people, and the support has been a really big help.

Although the weekly meetings generally provided an atmosphere of support and encouragement for the five teachers, there were times when individual teachers did not feel supported there. One teacher felt that when she shared a weakness, other teachers were quick to point out solutions, when all she had really wanted was some understanding. As a result, her strategy for coping with that included wording what she said a little more carefully, using her knowledge of the other teachers to not take things personally, and coming to me in private to talk about certain issues about which she desired input. Another teacher felt that it was almost better to come in with something bad that had happened so you could receive sympathy, than to share something good when other people were struggling, because it was sort of like pouring salt on their wounds, and they were not necessarily able to rejoice in her victory in the same way they could sympathize with her struggles. Yet neither of these teachers felt negatively about the STEP program--rather, they realized that group dynamics are complex and people need time to get to know each other and learn how to communicate with one another. One teacher felt that when there was something she did not want the whole teaching staff to know, the STEP meetings provided a safe place to share those incidents.

The STEP program fostered a sense of community because it provided a place and regular time to talk, a protected environment where it was okay to share weaknesses and struggles (most of the time), and the opportunity to relate experiences and feel understood. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify four defining characteristics of a "sense of

community," including 1) a sense of membership or belonging, 2) mutual influence over one another, 3) a shared emotional connection, and 4) the integration and fulfillment of needs. According to the teachers, these elements were usually present in the weekly STEP meetings.

In addition, every teacher mentioned how supportive the principal of the school was in helping them with specific problems and encouraging them. Several of them mentioned that they also felt supported by other teachers in the school, particularly those with whom they lived. Literature on school culture tells us that context is very important, and the school as a whole seemed to offer a supportive culture in which these beginning teachers could thrive (Saphier & King, 1985).

STEPs to Reflective Practice

The two primary ways that reflective practice was fostered among the teachers were the use of videotape and the use of interactive journals. While some of the teachers had been videotaped in their teacher preparation program, most had not, and they found the experience uncomfortable. I was an experienced teacher coming in to watch them teach; not only that, their every move was captured on tape. As each teacher and I watched the videotape together (before watching it with the entire STEP group), there was a constant visual reminder of things they did not like about their management, instruction or interaction with students. Yet, as each teacher and I viewed the tape together, it served as a powerful vehicle to point out those things which the teacher had done well. It is harder for beginning teachers to focus on the positive than the negative, and they needed their confidence built through highlighting specific things which they had done well. Often, I would then point out these same positive characteristics when we watched the videotape together as a group. As other teachers commented on positive aspects they saw in the tape, it helped reinforce the idea that, in spite of the teacher's discomfort regarding the lesson, there were many principles of effective teaching and management which others recognized.

In addition, when the teacher pointed out something she did not like about her actions or the students' reactions on the tape, it provided a means to link theory with practice--giving reasons for why things did not go the way she had hoped or providing alternatives based on current research. In many cases, teachers then went back and tried

to implement some of the ideas they generated themselves or the suggestions given to them, often with great success.

For instance, one teacher conducted a math lesson on ordering decimals when I videotaped her one day. Using some materials she had received from another teacher, the teacher I was observing conducted a highly-creative and interactive lesson. Unfortunately, the students did not grasp the concepts in the way the teacher had hoped and by the end of the session it was not clear that their understanding had been significantly advanced. However, as she and I watched the tape together, I indicated places where she had made intuitive leaps in her teaching that the students were not able to follow because she had not made the steps explicit. She had a great cooperative learning activity for them, but because she did not explain it clearly, there was initially a lot of confusion. When she saw that part of their struggle was a result of something she had done (or not done), she retaught the same lesson the next day, using ideas she and I had discussed, and then extended the learning even further. She later said that two of my specific suggestions had made a big difference in their understanding and application of ordering decimals. She was excited that they were finally getting it.

Another teacher was concerned about the disrespect some of her students seemed to exhibit toward her on a regular basis. After I videotaped her classroom, we discussed the possibility that the students did not always take her seriously because her voice and body language were so gentle and because she seemed unwilling to follow through on negative consequences. The next day she began to alter her voice and body language when she needed to discipline students, and she more consistently enforced the rules that had been established. She commented in our STEP meeting that there had been an immediate change and that things had gone much smoother in the class. Later she wrote in her journal about realizing the need to earn the students' respect before she could develop the close interpersonal relationships for which she had hoped when she entered teaching.

Several teachers commented both in interviews and in their journals that the opportunity to watch other teachers' lessons gave them insight into their own teaching and management techniques, often giving them new ideas to try or helping them to see their students in a new way. Watching their own lessons on tape helped them to see both

positive and negative aspects of their classroom. One teacher commented in her journal that she was overly critical of herself when she first watched the videotape with me. She went on to say that when she watched it with the other teachers it was a much more positive experience, and she "was able to reflect on some of the positive aspects as well as the areas to work on."

Kottkamp (1990) writes, "Videotape is the most complete means available for capturing events for later reflection-on-action" (p. 190). He goes on to comment that reflection is facilitated through the use of videotape, and with the help of a supervisor or 'coach,' the person viewing the tape can "reframe the teaching event and make plans for improved practice" (p. 191). Additionally, when videotapes are viewed in a group setting, "the emphasis is on reframing or reconceptualizing the problematic situation being observed, rather than on criticizing the actions of the practitioner" (p. 191). For the teachers in the STEP program, both the initial observation of the videotape with me (the supervisor) and the second observation in the group provided opportunities for the kind of reflection-on-action that Kottkamp describes. While other aspects of the STEP program provided opportunities for the teachers to reflect on their practice, the videotapes were their primary means of reflection.

STEPs to Experimenting and Developing Expertise

> *If you foster an attitude or an atmosphere of "We're first year teachers, we're going to make mistakes, let's challenge each other, but let's also accept the mistakes," which you did, then I think the group will be open...But I think there was a lot of...learning, "Oh, that's how [she] does it, and maybe I could try that." Or her saying, "Oh, you did this?," and "I like how you did that." Like one day, [another teacher] wandered in and saw that I had just run off little plan sheets. She said, "Oh, I like how you do that, I hadn't realized about doing that." So then, she went and made her own, and of course it's entirely different, a lot more structured, whereas mine's...more open, but she took my idea and then adapted it for her, and that's what STEP fosters.*

Often, as a result of dialogue about their own or another teacher's videotapes, the STEP teachers experimented with new ideas and techniques in their classrooms. One teacher revised her language arts program following a videotaping of a reading lesson, in which she realized that she really had no goals other than going through the basal reader, story by story. She spent time over the Christmas break determining where she wanted

her students to be by the end of the year, and she now plans each language arts lesson to move toward those goals.

All the teachers experimented with various management techniques as a result of watching each others' videotapes and discussing what worked for each one of them. Some learned to be more consistent in the use of rewards and consequences. Others tried to count down from five to zero when they wanted to get students' attention. One teacher found the use of a timer serviceable in motivating students to complete several tasks in a row. A number of teachers commented that they became much more conscious of not turning their backs on students because they saw on a videotape how misbehavior could easily occur behind the teacher's back. Finally, one teacher remarked that her attitude toward discipline had changed as a result of talking with other teachers. She now tried to understand why students were doing what they were doing, rather than just having a rigid system of control.

The teachers also experimented with instructional techniques they either observed on the videotapes or learned through mini-lessons conducted by myself and another experienced teacher. These techniques included the use of wait time after asking questions of students, trying review games and other "fun" forms of assessment, experimenting with various models of cooperative learning, allowing students to choose their own learning activities, helping students think inductively and critically, and using discovery and hands-on learning activities. Often, the teachers would try out a new idea either the next day or the next week after they learned something new in a STEP meeting. At the next meeting, they were able to share how things had gone--with many success stories reported along the way.

One of the boldest examples of experimentation came after I taped a lesson a teacher had conducted on the slave trade in Africa. During the lesson, I observed that the students' comments and questions indicated that they were troubled and trying to grapple with how people could capture and enslave other people. The teacher, as is common for new teachers, was so focused on the material she hoped to cover that she did not realize how the lesson was affecting the students. As she and I watched the videotape together, she admitted that she was afraid to open up the time for a deeper discussion because the students had once accused her of being a racist and she was scared that this topic might

become really negative. She also saw how her focus on what she was trying to teach kept her from realizing the emotional effects of the lesson on her students. After we talked, she decided to use her class time that day to talk some more about the topic. She arranged the desks in a circle, shared her own position on and horror of the slave trade, and gave the students the opportunity to talk about their feelings and raise additional questions they had. They ended their lesson with a time of prayer, and overall the teacher felt like it had been a positive time.

After we watched her videotape during our STEP meeting, she commented, "After seeing the tape a second time, I realize that I've studied the slave trade and slavery so much that it has lost some of its horror for me. Watching it through the students' eyes, I see again the horror and the terrible tragedy it was!" This teacher was convinced that the experience of seeing her lesson on tape, though difficult, had made her a more sensitive and caring teacher. She not only learned about herself and her teaching by watching the videotape, but she then went on to experiment and take a risk by trying something she had not done before.

Another teacher believed the STEP program contributed to an accelerated learning curve, enabling her to try a variety of strategies and receive more feedback than she might otherwise have received.

> *I really appreciate the STEP program because I feel that I have a precious gift that I have been granted that not many new teachers, first-year teachers, get in being able to come into a new school, have as light a curriculum load as I have had, the incredible support and training that has just been continually there to me every week....I think that in comparison from my first year to my second year, I will have had so many benefits because of the STEP program that I will have accelerated faster than maybe somebody else who hadn't had the program would, because of the fact that I've had so much training....I think that I will be a better teacher next year than I would have been without it--hands down!....I think it's very valuable...and I think it's something that has carry-over to other schools, even public schools, because I think that they wouldn't have those turnovers there if they communicated this much support and this much affirmation for their first-year teachers.*

By providing an environment where teachers could freely exchange ideas, reflect on their own teaching and the teaching of their colleagues, and share the results of their experiments with one another, the STEP program fostered growth beyond the survival stage of beginning teaching, so that by three-quarters of the way through the school year, the teachers were able to say that they either no longer needed the weekly meetings or

they saw them more as a place to learn new information and teaching techniques, rather than needing them for survival.

Teacher Voices: Making the STEP Program More Effective

When asked about ways they would alter the STEP program to make it more responsive to their needs, the teachers had a number of suggestions which should be taken into account should the program be continued in the future. Perhaps the two greatest needs the teachers had which were not adequately addressed through STEP were: 1) the need to learn about the age-level characteristics of their specific students; and 2) the need to know the specific curriculum content which they were expected to cover, although they were not sure how STEP could be adjusted to cover all subject areas and age-level characteristics for third through seventh graders. In addition, the teachers expressed a desire for help in lesson planning strategies, and even in the opportunity to plan lessons and units together in pairs or as a group during our meetings. One teacher suggested using our STEP meetings to read articles of interest that she never had a chance to get to otherwise.

One weakness of the STEP program was a structural constraint which affected the development of relationships between the teachers. I spent little time at the beginning focusing on how to relate to one another in the group. We did not take much time to get to know each other or understand communication styles and group dynamics. As a result, some teachers did not always feel that the meetings were a safe place in which to share. Had more time been spent in the early stages focusing on the STEP group itself, rather than just focusing on how each teacher was doing in her classroom, we might have been able to prevent some of the feelings of competition or misunderstanding which occurred.

A couple of teachers expressed the feeling that whereas STEP had been necessary for their survival during the first few months, it now (after six months) seemed like something that took away precious time from other things they needed to do after school. They wondered if STEP might be most effective if it were just for half the year or if the frequency of meetings could be reduced during the second half to perhaps once a month or every other week. Given the competing demands on any teacher's time, this may be a suitable way to adapt to the changing needs of the teachers throughout their first year. On the other hand, meeting weekly during the second half of the year allowed the group to

move beyond survival skills to explore other areas, such as culturally relevant teaching, various learning theories, and experimentation with a variety of instructional techniques.

In summary, the teachers generally found the STEP meetings to be a place of support, where they were able to analyze and critique their own teaching, learn from the experiences of other teachers, and then incorporate what they learned back into their own classrooms, even though the sense of community fostered among the group was somewhat uneven.

Discussion

Limitations of the Study

The school in which this study took place is obviously not typical of the vast majority of schools in the United States today. It is a small Christian school (150 students) with class sizes of 14 to 17 students. Beginning public school teachers are more likely to have 30 or more students in their classrooms and to be in schools with over 1000 students. In addition, the teachers all voluntarily moved great distances to not only teach in the school but live in the surrounding community. The fact that the teachers live with one another and with other teachers at the school, have relationships with each other outside of school, and have common religious beliefs almost certainly has had an effect on the dynamics of the STEP program. Furthermore, because the teachers are not tied to a union contract, the principal and I could "require" them to come each week after school, something that might be much less feasible in a public setting where "released time" might be necessary to bring teachers together in such a way.

The uniqueness of this particular setting means that generalizations to other school settings must be done with caution. Nevertheless, the issues facing new teachers were not unique to this group, including the issues which white, middle-class teachers face when they encounter racial, cultural and linguistic differences in their students. The specifics of learning how to manage yourself, your students, your curriculum, and the daily administrative tasks of a teacher may change from one setting to another, but the principles do not significantly change.

Another limitation of this study is the dual role I played as both facilitator and researcher of the STEP program. As I wrote in my field notes at one point,

It's difficult to research yourself and your own group. I find that I don't always know whether I'm the researcher or the teacher-leader of the group, whether I'm the distant observer or the involved participant. And my notes here are sometimes written from one perspective and sometimes from the other. That's probably an important issue when doing this kind of research.

I have no answers for this dilemma, except to say that my necessary subjectivity in analyzing the STEP program is a factor which must be considered when evaluating the findings.

Implications of the Study

Nevertheless, I believe that this study provides a model which could be replicated in any school where there are two or more new teachers. In addition, the model could easily be adapted to meet the needs of experienced teachers who want support and challenge to grow and experiment. While the person responsible for formally evaluating teachers (such as the principal) should not be the person facilitating a program such as the one described above, the model requires only five hours per week of one person's time in order to lead the group. Most schools have an assistant principal, a curriculum coordinator, or a mentor/master teacher whose schedule could be adjusted to allow five hours per week for such a program. The payoff of accelerating the learning curve of new teachers, and perhaps increasing their longevity in the school, should be more than adequate in a cost-benefit analysis.

As Starratt (1991), Weiss and her colleagues (1992) have found, schools seeking to become more effective cannot merely restructure; the school culture must change to become more conducive to collaboration and support among teachers. Breaking down the barriers of teacher isolation is a monumental task, but starting with beginning teachers provides the greatest hope to do just that--they are still teachable, they are very needy in their first year, and many of them have had team-teaching experiences in their student-teaching, so they are used to collaboration. They are also used to having others watch and evaluate their teaching during their teacher preparation program, so the videotaping and group discussion will seem less foreign to them than it might to veteran teachers who have been isolated for five or ten years.

Through documenting the ways in which the five teachers in the STEP program depended on one another for support and encouragement, the ways in which their corporate and personal reflection was nurtured, and the resulting experimentation which

they demonstrated, I hope to provide a model for how other beginning teachers can learn how to be part of a professional community of support and develop habits of reflective practice which will serve them well throughout their teaching career. This model could be used in a variety of pre-service and in-service settings, either teacher-initiated or mentor-led, and could ultimately result in greater teacher longevity, a change in school culture toward more teacher collegiality and collaboration, and the ability of teachers to continually reflect on and improve their own practice, thereby resulting in benefits to their students and the entire school community.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol for the Teachers in the STEP Program

1. Briefly review your academic background. Schools attended, college major, degrees received.
2. Did you go through a teacher preparation program? If so, describe it.
3. Have you had any prior teaching experience before this year? Student teaching, other positions?
4. Describe your current teaching responsibilities.
5. What motivated you to want to join [parent organization] and teach at [name of] School this year?
6. In what ways did you feel prepared for what you're currently doing? In what ways did you feel unprepared?
7. What aspect of the STEP program has been most helpful or beneficial for you thus far?

    -Videotaping and 1-on-1 with me.
    -Watching and discussing videotape with peers.
    -Regular opportunities to unload, talk about problems with peers at meetings.
    -Journal writing and interaction.
    -Mini-lessons.
    -Other.

8. In what other ways have you felt supported as a new teacher this year?
9. What have you done differently in your classroom, changed around, or experimented with as a result of something you learned through STEP?
10. What has been your greatest joy or success story in teaching this year?
11. What has been your greatest crisis or difficulty in teaching this year? Did the STEP program provide any assistance in resolving this crisis or difficulty?
12. What difficulties or needs have you encountered in teaching this year that have not been addressed in the STEP program? How would you recommend the program be adjusted to accommodate these needs?
13. How has this first year of teaching differed from your expectations?
14. Describe how your feelings and thoughts about the STEP program have evolved or changed since the beginning of the school year.
15. How have your relationships with the other teachers in STEP changed since August/September?
16. Some organizations are said to have strong cultures, to be unified by a set of values, goals or traditions. Is that true here?
17. Is there anything else you would like to share about the first year of teaching or being in the STEP program?

Interview Protocol for the Principal of the School Where the STEP Program was Implemented

1. Briefly review your academic background. Schools attended, college major, degrees received.
2. Did you go through a teacher preparation program? If so, describe it.
3. Briefly describe your teaching and administrative experience.
4. Describe your current responsibilities.
5. Have the teachers indicated to you that they have felt supported as a new teacher this year?
6. What do you feel is different (if anything) about the experience the 5 STEP teachers are getting from previous beginning teachers?
7. What aspect of the STEP program has been most helpful or beneficial for you as a principal thus far and for the 5 teachers in the program?
   - -Videotaping and 1-on-1 with me.
   - -Watching and discussing videotape with peers.
   - -Regular opportunities to unload, talk about problems with peers at meetings.
   - -Journal writing and interaction.
   - -Mini-lessons.
   - -Other.
8. In what ways has the STEP program made a difference
   - -in their teaching,
   - -relationships with students,
   - -relationships with each other,
   - -relationships with you,
   - -etc?
9. What difficulties or needs have the teachers encountered this year that have not been addressed in the STEP program? How would you recommend the program be adjusted to accommodate these needs?
10. How has this year (with so many new teachers) differed from your expectations?
11. Do you see any potential for this program to be offered for veteran teachers? On what basis? How would it need to be adapted?
12. Have other school personnel made comments to you about the STEP program or the teachers involved in it?
13. Some organizations are said to have strong cultures, to be unified by a set of values, goals or traditions. Is that true here?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about the teachers in STEP or the STEP program itself?