

Model Versus Mentor: Defining the Necessary Qualities of the Effective Cooperating Teacher

By Wendy J. Glenn

Student teaching is a key event in the lives of future educators; it can make or break their success in their own classrooms. The selection of qualified cooperating teachers with whom these students will work is accordingly imperative. Placing a student in a classroom run by a teacher whose methods fly in the face of what we know to be effective, or assigning a student to a teacher who spends his/her time in the lounge reading the newspaper and drinking coffee rather than guiding and supporting the student, would be not only unfair to the student but unethical in terms of our goals as teacher educators. Student teaching should provide students the opportunity to grow as educators—to learn from those who are more knowledgeable, to take risks, and to fail without becoming failures. Knowing the characteristics

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of an effective cooperating teacher can help ensure that pre-service teachers are placed in settings that will benefit and support them in their first real teaching endeavor. This study explores these characteristics by examining the following question: Knowing that cooperating teachers differ in their personalities and pedagogy, what underlying traits might they possess that make them effective in meeting the needs of their assigned student teacher?

Cooperating teachers play a critical role in the preparation of the student teachers in their care (Lane,

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Lacefield-Parachini, & Isken, 2003; Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Hamilton & Riley, 1999; Mason 1997; Young 1996; Wiggins 1995). An effective cooperating teacher models, for instance, examples of good practice for the student teacher to evaluate and emulate (Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002). Pre-service teachers, when asked to describe the most helpful behaviors and practices demonstrated by their cooperating teachers, noted the importance of witnessing good classroom organization and planning, positive rapport with students, knowledge of subject matter, establishment of a daily routine, good classroom management, and compassion toward students (Osunde, 1996). The selection of cooperating teachers would most effectively, then, be completed with an eye toward finding veteran teachers who demonstrate these practices.

In addition to recognizing the importance of the cooperating teacher as model educator, it is of equal import to consider the cooperating teacher as a mentor for the student teacher. As mentors, cooperating teachers should aim not only to help students become effective practitioners but help them develop as professionals in the field. Student teachers need to know how to teach, but they also need to know how to reflect on their progress, work effectively with their colleagues, and maintain their passion amidst personal and work-related stresses. In this context, mentoring describes the work of experienced teachers who work with student teachers using an approach that includes “guiding, reflecting, and coaching” (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2000).

Other researchers have also explored the role of the cooperating teacher as mentor. Randi Nevins Stanulus and Dee Russell (2000) noted that trust and communication must be established between student teacher and cooperating teacher in order to foster the learning of teaching. Peg Graham explored the potential tensions that result from philosophical differences and an intolerance of uncertainty (1997), as well as issues of power as they affect the student teacher-cooperating teacher pair (1999). Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, and Isken (2003) examined the influence of mentor teachers who differed from their assigned student teachers in terms of their beliefs in reform-minded practices.

Some researchers, in their focus on the elements necessary for an effective placement or practicum experience, have touched upon the mentoring role in the student teaching placement. Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner (2002) investigated the roles that should be played by student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors in the creation of a positive collaborative experience, noting that all participants must feel challenged, that cooperating teachers are responsible for the education of students before the education of the student teacher, and that university supervisors bear the responsibility of providing mentorship for both student and cooperating teacher. Beck and Kosnik (2002) examined student teacher perceptions of the components of an effective practicum placement. In addition to identifying the need for flexibility in content and method and a heavy but not excessive workload, they also described some cooperating teacher expectations

held on behalf of student teachers. These included the need to provide emotional support, serve as a peer in the professional relationship, collaborate, and provide feedback. No work has been done, however, to outline specifically a profile of the effective mentor for use as a guide in the selection of the cooperating teacher.

Wondering

As a student teacher supervisor, I have had the opportunity to observe student teacher cooperating teacher interactions in many settings. The students and teachers with whom I worked last spring, however, provided a unique example of how these interactions might play out. Early in the semester, both students mentioned how pleased they were with their placement; the assigned mentors, they said, were wonderful. Over the course of my observations and discussions with each, however, it became obvious that the two mentors differed considerably in their approach and teaching philosophy. Cindy was more messy and spontaneous. She willingly threw her plans out the window, assuming she had any to begin with, for the sake of a teachable moment. Although Joan was more traditional, she strived to establish a close, personal relationship with each of her students. Both mentors were identified as effective by their student teachers, but they did not fit the same mold. What, then, I wondered, did these individuals possess that made them effective mentors for the assigned student teachers? Because the two cooperating teachers differed considerably in their pedagogy, did they possess other underlying traits that made them effective mentors, as opposed to models, for their student teachers?

Gathering

To further explore these questions, I designed a qualitative research study. I gathered raw data in three forms: direct observation, interviews, and artifacts. After an initial meeting with each student teacher mentor pair to establish contact and begin a working relationship, I formally observed each pair three times over the course of the semester and gathered field notes to record what was observed. The first part of each observation took place in the classroom during a lesson taught by the student teacher for which the mentor remained present. The second part consisted of a three-way meeting intended for discussion of the student teacher's lesson, in particular, and her progress, in general. Each observation lasted approximately two hours, and the focus of each was the classroom and professional interaction of the student teacher mentor pair.

In addition to classroom observations, individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted in private with each participant. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. Initial questions for the student teachers were as follows:

- (1) Describe the relationship you share with your mentor teacher.
- (2) In what way(s) has your mentor teacher been particularly helpful?

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- (3) What criticisms do you have of her as a mentor?
- (4) How has she met your expectations about how a mentor teacher would (or should) be?
- (5) How has she contradicted your expectations about how a mentor teacher would (or should) be?

Initial questions asked of each mentor included:

- (1) Describe the relationship you share with your student teacher.
- (2) Why did you agree to become a mentor teacher?
- (3) How do you feel you can best benefit your student teacher as her mentor?
- (4) What has been the most rewarding part of your mentoring experience thus far?
- (5) What has been the most challenging part of your mentoring experience thus far?

The third source of data came in the form of artifacts, namely first and second trimester evaluations of each student teacher completed by the respective cooperating teacher of each as part of the College of Education requirements, as well as informal, written evaluations of given lessons composed by the cooperating teachers during their observations, whether I was present or not. As a university supervisor, I was responsible for reviewing, signing, and submitting completed evaluations and thus had access to this data. Participants also shared willingly the informal evaluation comments composed as formative feedback throughout the semester. Consent was secured for all participants for all data gathered.

Connecting

In the analysis of the collected data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), salient traits that served to define the effective mentor emerged. As initial data were gathered, they were analyzed first in terms of recurring categories, with particular attention paid to themes that appeared repeatedly. As additional data were gathered, new field notes were coded and compared with already coded data and the emerging categories. Upon the collection of all data, categories were refined to ensure that they reflected evidence from each of the three sources in hopes of attaining the triangulation of data. As a result of this analysis, resulting categories suggested that effective mentors collaborate rather than dictate, relinquish an appropriate level of control, allow for personal relationships, share constructive feedback, and accept differences. Each characteristic will be addressed in turn with data provided for illustration.

Collaborating Rather than Dictating

The need for the mentor teacher to work with the student teacher as a colleague

rather than a boss arose repeatedly in the data. Kendra hoped for a cooperating teacher who was flexible and not so set in her ways as to say, "Here are my lesson plans. Go to it." She was worried she might find herself working with a teacher who "policed" her and required that everything she did be approved. Happily, her desires were realized. She noted repeatedly that she and Cindy worked as a team and often "switch[ed] back and forth," sharing the role of authority in the classroom. She mentioned, for example, that when the two evaluated student writing, they sometimes disagreed over the deserved grade. If the student in question, however, was one with whom Kendra had worked often, Cindy took Kendra's opinion over her own.

This collaborative relationship was observed by me, as well. During one class period, student groups took turns giving class presentations. While Kendra facilitated this process, Cindy ensured that the remaining students were attentive. When two groups of young men began talking during one presentation, she first made eye contact with the members of each group and then moved to another spot in the room where she could use proximity to her advantage. In another instance, Kendra was in the process of transitioning into a new activity. While she gave instructions to the students, Cindy passed out materials they would need to complete the task being described. In the post-observation meeting, evidence of the collaborative nature of their relationship surfaced once again. When Kendra claimed it would be difficult to assign grades to the presentations, Cindy piped in, "We'll do that together."

Elizabeth also noted the value of such a partnered relationship. The word she most commonly used to describe Joan was that of "supportive." She noted, "Joan offers to help with planning and makes her tests available, but she lets me do what I want to do." As a result, Elizabeth felt confident in her decision to alter assignments that Joan had developed in the past for courses Elizabeth was teaching. In "Science Fiction," for example, Elizabeth designed a unit around each individual's reading of a novel of his/her choice, following a reading workshop model. In "Shakespeare," she opted to have students design and perform a debate rather than write the paper Joan typically assigns. Despite these changes, there was no resentment on the part of Joan. Not only did she support Elizabeth's creativity, she used her ideas in her other classes, integrating, for instance, a poem Elizabeth successfully taught to her students into her own drama course.

Relinquishing an Appropriate Level of Control

Data from this study suggests that effective mentors maintain a balance of control in the amount of independence they allow the student teacher; they are neither too reluctant to hand their students over to the student teacher nor too willing to allow the student teacher to assume full classroom responsibility before he/she is ready. Kendra reported that she enjoyed such a balance, claiming that Cindy gave her primary authority in the classroom but was willing to step in should the need arise. She described one event that demonstrates this clearly:

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In my unit on *Bless Me, Ultima*, a few particular students were quick to make negative comments and were unwilling to give the book a chance. I pulled them out of their comfort zones, and they were acting poorly as a result. At one point, I was in the process of explaining something to the class, and these boys continued to express their dissatisfaction. Cindy jumped in and talked about respect, trying new things, etc. It was so helpful to me because I didn't have the words. I had the feelings but not the words. Cindy then transitioned back to me, and the lesson continued without disruption.

Kendra went on, "I expected her [Cindy] to be out of the classroom more, but her presence doesn't matter. She usually doesn't involve herself directly when I'm teaching unless we are intentionally working together. She is there to help as needed." During our post-observation meetings, Cindy participated but existed more as a bystander, thus allowing Kendra control over the discussion. During one meeting, she worked on Kendra's first trimester evaluation; during another, she read and highlighted *Huck Finn* in preparation for another class, commenting only when directly asked a question. In her interview, she reported that she wanted Kendra to assume responsibility for her own teaching and "trust her instincts and intuition."

In terms of relinquishing control, Joan's level of effectiveness was a bit trickier to evaluate. She claimed she became a mentor teacher because she wanted "to impart [her] experiences to others and share in their excitement of the profession" and felt she could best serve Elizabeth by forcing her to "tow the line [by] letting her fall if she didn't plan well enough, making her deal with the disruptive students in class instead of butting in and fixing it, allowing her to answer questions she wasn't prepared for instead of speaking up to answer them [her]self." Elizabeth, in part, agreed that Joan turned the classroom authority over to her, reporting, "She sends my students to me [when they have a question, problem, etc.]." It unnerved her slightly, however, that Joan developed a system of eye signals to ensure that Elizabeth knew when she was on the right track, implying that Joan's role was that of overseer rather than guide, and that she rarely left the classroom.

Observation indicated that despite Joan's advocacy of a laissez-faire approach, her inability to allow Elizabeth the freedom she needed was perhaps more salient than she had thought or was willing to express. Joan had a difficult time letting go and handing her students over to Elizabeth. During each observation, Joan remained physically "outside" the class, sitting by me at the desk in the back of the room or at the computer checking her email. However, her presence remained known. During one classroom activity, students in a creative writing class were asked to compose a poem. Although Elizabeth was in charge and moving about the room to help students in need and check progress, Joan was actively engaged with several students who finished their work and were looking for feedback. Instead of waiting to speak with Elizabeth, they approached Joan. The first student, a male, brought his poem to her and received the compliment that the piece was powerful. When a second male shared his poem with her, Joan read it and laughed aloud in several spots. She commented on the effectiveness of his imagery by citing two

specific examples from his work. A third student, female this time, handed her her poem. Again, Joan read the work and pointed out a few lines that she particularly liked. In each instance, the attention of several students in the class was drawn from Elizabeth to Joan as they turned around to see what was going on in the back corner of the classroom. In another instance, students in the science fiction class were asked by Elizabeth to share their essays. While they read aloud, Joan worked at the computer, her back turned to the class. When student essays revealed a meaningful idea or humorous insight, Joan clapped or laughed to herself accordingly, again drawing student attention to herself. Joan had difficulty not being part of the act.

Allowing for Personal Relationships

In several instances, Kendra underscored the importance of working with a mentor teacher who cared about her personally as well as professionally. In the interview, Kendra described her mentor teacher as “really fun, easy to talk to, and easy-going.” She noted that their “relationship does not end at the classroom . . . [They share] friendship first” and a professional relationship second. Her mentor teacher agreed, claiming their relationship was “absolutely ideal.” She reported,

We’ve somehow managed to establish and maintain the appropriate distinction / separation between our personal and professional relationships, while enjoying a warm and happy friendship. I’ve gained a ‘daughter’ as well as a strong ‘business’ partner.

Observations revealed the easy give and take existent in this relationship. The two chatted as though they were old friends, interrupting one another, referring to events they shared earlier in the day or semester, etc.

In contrast, this area was the one that was most troubling in the relationship shared by Elizabeth and Joan. Elizabeth desired a personal connection with her mentor, evident, for example, in the disappointment she expressed at not being invited to a birthday party for Joan organized by several department members. Joan, however, felt that Elizabeth wished to maintain some distance between the two, noting, “We are friendly but not friends. We are colleagues, but not true colleagues. There is still a feeling of student teacher there. I don’t always like that, but she seems to want to keep it that way.” The pair did not share the close personal relationship enjoyed by Kendra and Cindy, but both wished they in fact did, suggesting the value of such a relationship in the student teacher-mentor experience.

Sharing Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback must be honest feedback. If mentors are unwilling to criticize, perhaps out of fear of negatively affecting the relationship shared with the student teacher, progress will be slow in coming. Unless student teachers know where their areas for improvement lie, they are likely to flounder with no direction. Obviously, honest feedback is most effective when the relationship between mentor and student teacher is positive. Student teachers working with mentors with whom

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they do not agree may perceive the mentors feedback as unhelpful, too harsh, etc., even if the mentors are indeed honest and accurate in their assessment. Conversely, mentor teachers may not be fully honest if they feel the evaluation is seen as a reflection of how well they are doing as mentors.

In the case of my participants, honest feedback was appropriately given and graciously received. Cindy reported that one of her chief attributes was that of candidness. Several times during my observations, Cindy's claim was witnessed. After every session, Cindy noted repeatedly how she believed Kendra was doing. She told Kendra that the students did "wonderfully well" on their presentations and loved the neighborhood maps she created. She claimed Kendra did "all she can to meet the needs of the several special- needs kids in the classroom." The formal evaluation comments written by Cindy and required by the College of Education demonstrate further Cindy's use of honest and useful feedback. I found it telling that she addressed her written statements to Kendra rather than College of Education readers. She wrote,

No problem with knowledge base. Focus more on age-appropriate tools and resources now. I want you to begin 'manipulating' your knowledge base to fit with high schoolers of average to below average thinking skills. . . . Try working with most of the available resources as they're generally established as diversified in styles and abilities. Your new items/resources are wonderful, but it's not necessary to reinvent the wheel [smiley face]. . . . [for evaluation form category, 'Presents information clearly']: Still a bit fast and over their heads at times, but much better.

Cindy was willing to suggest changes in Kendra's approach but did so with candor and sensitivity, emphasizing that which she was doing well.

Similarly, Joan's effectiveness as an evaluator was clear as evidenced by both her written and oral comments. Notes written in the first evaluation suggested Joan's attempt to develop Elizabeth's confidence. She focused on her strengths, noting,

Elizabeth consistently links lessons together in interesting and effective ways. . . . [She] does a great job varying activities to encourage students to participate. . . . [She] tries to have an interaction with each of her students during every class.

In the later evaluation, she identified areas of improvement, encouraging Elizabeth's progress. She wrote, "Elizabeth has opened up and seems more comfortable. . . . She has grown leaps and bounds explaining expectations, managing disruptions, and maintaining positive behavior and should continue her work in this area." After our first post-observation meeting, Joan also made it clear that Elizabeth was doing well, mentioning the success she had with students in her creative writing course, "an unusually difficult group." Elizabeth appreciated Joan's utilization of informal feedback, in particular. "If she hears me say something either good or bad," reported Elizabeth, "she will write it down and share it later."

Accepting Differences

Both student teachers reported that their future classrooms would function differently from that of their mentor teachers. Kendra, for example, noted some frustration with Cindy's approach to planning. She claimed,

We do much on the fly. I work well in this situation but don't think it is realistic in the real world where I won't have her to fall back on. With my more recent unit, I had it really planned well. I have a tendency to do more planning. . . . Her personality is very different from mine.

Similarly, Elizabeth commented, "There are many things [that Joan does that] I would never do in my classroom. Her clothing is often unprofessional, she recently had a nose piercing, her relationships with students go beyond what I feel comfortable with, and she openly criticizes one of the vice-principals, even in the presence of students."

Yet, both student teachers stated that they would not have changed their placement given the opportunity to do so; they came to accept that differences are inevitable and perhaps even useful in the student teaching situation. According to Kendra, "At first, I may have criticized certain behaviors, but now I see why Cindy does things as she does." Although the personality and style of the mentor teacher did not match that of the student teacher, conflict was not inevitable. Expectations were not met exactly, but the situation worked out well despite this. As noted by Elizabeth when describing her perception of the typical mentor teacher, "I imagined someone more structured and predictable. I thought that that was what I wanted [in a mentor], but Joan is such a strong teacher, I can deal with the issue of organization on my own."

The mentor teachers, as well, recognized and accepted the different teaching approaches implemented by themselves and their assigned student teachers. Cindy claimed she learned much from Kendra, noting, "One of the most rewarding aspects of the mentoring experience has been the professional knowledge (lesson plans, workshop model, etc.) [Kendra] has imparted." Joan agreed with Cindy, reporting,

This particular experience has definitely made me review my own classroom management skills, particularly with regard to my attitude toward students. I see Elizabeth trying to reflect my own attitude, and I realize how TOO laid back I am with them! . . . [I also find myself working on] not being judgmental about her personality or teaching style because it is completely opposite of mine.

Discovering

An interesting, and unanticipated, finding of this study was that both Cindy and Joan were perceived by their student teachers as outcasts from the department. Cindy walked out of department meetings when discussion of a hot issue got out of hand, traveled off campus for lunch each day rather than sit with her colleagues, and subversively kept a coffee maker and microwave in her classroom to limit time

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spent in the English department office. According to Elizabeth, Joan often dressed “unprofessionally.” For a time, she even wore a nose ring despite the conservative climate of her district. She did not walk out of department and staff meetings; she simply “forgot” to attend. In both cases, these teachers were identified by their student teachers as outcasts in some part because they were successful teachers who were liked by their students. Kendra reported that kids regularly returned to visit with Cindy; I can attest to this, as several came by during the time I was there. Joan, also, was well-liked and popular among students. Elizabeth noted, “Students adore her. She is a wonderful teacher. She is the teacher we’d all like to be but don’t have the clout to be.”

Several questions for future study emerged as a result of these unexpected findings:

- ◆ Are the most effective mentors those who work outside the mainstream, those who risk following their passions despite potential condemnation?
- ◆ How valuable to student teachers are non-traditional or rebellious teachers who are well-liked by their students and teach well despite their refusal to fit traditional norms?
- ◆ How different in personality and approach from a student teacher can a cooperating teacher be and still be an effective mentor and model for that student teacher?

Admitting and Concluding

Admittedly, responses and observations gathered from just two mentor student teacher pairs over a short duration of time are limited in scope. Further exploration of traits that serve to define an effective mentor is certainly necessary. In terms of the student-provided data, we must consider also that student teachers face unique circumstances due to their joint role as student and as teacher. Unlike employed teachers, they are dependent upon their cooperating teachers for letters of recommendation that may influence whether or not a permanent teaching position is attained after the student teaching experience. As a result, student teachers might feel as though they need to avoid a disruption of the power balance and thus choose not to contradict or call into question a teacher’s practices. Their willingness to share honestly might be shaped by their fear of jeopardizing a future job offer. Because I knew the students involved and enjoyed a healthy working relationship with them, I am confident that their comments reflect an honest vision of their experience.

Data gathered in the form of observations, interviews, and artifacts suggests that, at least in the case of two student-cooperating teacher pairs, effective mentors collaborate rather than dictate, relinquish an appropriate level of control, allow for personal relationships, share constructive feedback, and accept differences. The mentor-student teacher pairs I observed enjoyed a positive and fulfilling experi-

ence; Kendra and Elizabeth, in particular, benefited from their placement and felt prepared to enter the real world of teaching. These were success stories. Unfortunately, not every placement results in such. If we can determine, in advance, the mentor qualities most likely to foster a positive working relationship among mentors and mentees, it would seem that the level of success and satisfaction attained by both parties would increase. Certainly the qualities outlined here do not provide a panacea to the problems associated with student teacher placements, but they offer at least some guide for use in the selection and assignment of mentor teachers.

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