Student Teacher Evaluations of Cooperating Teachers as Indices of Effective Mentoring

By Kristin L. Sayeski & Kim J. Paulsen

Every year teacher preparation programs invest considerable time and energy in selecting and supporting cooperating teachers who serve as mentors for their student teachers (Sinclair, Dowson, & Thistleton-Martin, 2006). Given the weight and importance educators place on the student teaching experience (see, Glickman & Bey, 1990; McIntyre, Bird, & Fox, 1996) and the powerful role it can play in shaping future teachers (Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, & Isken, 2003; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001), it makes sense for teacher preparation programs to identify those practices of cooperating teachers that contribute to quality student teaching experiences. Further, knowledge of highly valued practices can be used to create professional development designed to enhance the mentoring skills of those teachers who serve as cooperating teachers.

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In this article, we present analysis of data from 389 student teachers' evaluations of cooperating teachers. From this data set, we identified those practices that student teachers acknowledged as having a positive influence on their professional development. The focus of this article is to codify specific cooperating teacher

behaviors that were identified repeatedly in the data set as contributing value to student teacher development. We then provide suggestion for how these practices can be addressed in the professional development of cooperating teachers.

Evaluating Cooperating Teachers

In recent decades, several studies examining the characteristics of cooperating teachers revealed important information regarding the background, experience, and qualities of these cooperating teachers. This body of research serves as an important foundation for understanding the population of teachers who serve as mentors to student teachers. In addition, the research highlights specific characteristics and behaviors that run across teachers identified as effective mentors.

Killian and Wilkins (2009) examined presage variables associated with a subset of elementary cooperating teachers (n=13) who were ranked as "highly effective" to determine if such variables could differentiate them from their less effective peers. Findings from their study revealed three factors consistent in the highly effective group—mid-range teaching experiences (10-29 years), previous supervision of 5 or more practicum students, and sustained relationship with the university supervisor. Highly effective cooperating teachers also had graduate coursework in observation and communication skills.

Similarly, Glenn (2006) set out to find identifying or unique characteristics of two teachers identified as "effective" yet who differed considerably from each other in terms of teaching style and approach. Glenn's research revealed that the balance of control, existence of personal relationship, provision of constructive feedback, and ability to accept differences were important aspects of effective student-cooperating teacher relationships.

Finally, in her study of cooperating teachers, Graham (2006) identified, what she termed as "maestros" and "mentors." Graham defined the maestros as those who "viewed learning to teach as an experiential process and the internship as a time to learn technical and managerial skills of teaching" (p. 1126). The mentors, on the other hand, "viewed teaching and the process of learning to teach as multidimensional and recursive…their feedback was more dialogic in nature" (p. 1126). Key behaviors that differentiated the mentors from the maestros were the mentor's ability to assist the intern in interpreting, reflecting, and co-constructing knowledge of teaching versus the maestros belief that the student teacher should imitate and adopt his or her teaching style.

Graham's (2006) findings reflect conceptualizations of mentoring that favor "transformation" over "transmission" based upon social construction models of learning (Blasé, 2009) or what Norman and Feinman-Nemser (2005) characterize as "educative" mentoring. This form of mentoring goes beyond technical advice and emotional support to help shape and develop a novice's conceptualization and thinking about the teaching and learning process. Yet, we find that evalua-

tions of cooperating teachers do not capture these types of complex mentoring practices.

Recent studies on cooperating teachers reveal background variables, beliefs, and characteristics that can be taken into consideration when identifying and selecting cooperating teachers. What is missing in the literature is the identification of specific mentoring practices of cooperating teachers that are deemed effective by student teachers across a range of teaching areas (e.g., elementary, secondary, and special education) and grade levels. The identification of "highly-valued" practices can lead to the creation of professional development workshops or supporting materials that will assist all cooperating teachers, regardless of background, setting, or personality, in improved mentoring of student teachers. Further, it was of interest to see if highly valued practices of cooperating teachers align with current recommendations on effective mentoring (see Blasé, 2009). The purpose of our study to was conduct an in-depth analysis of evaluations on cooperating teachers across a wide range of teaching areas to see if a consistent (and therefore transferrable) set of practices can be identified and how these practices align with current calls for "educative" mentoring (Norman & Feinman-Nemser, 2005).

Method

During a three-year time period, over 400 student teachers completed online evaluations of their cooperating teachers. The open-ended, qualitative evaluations were analyzed using content analysis to codify specific mentoring practices identified as contributing positively to the student teacher experience. The student teachers were all preservice teachers enrolled in Master's degree programs in the area of elementary education, special education, or a specific content area in secondary education (i.e., English, mathematics, social studies, foreign language, or one of the sciences) at a university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. All students were working on their initial licensure and had no prior formal teaching experience. Over the three-years, 463 student teachers completed the student teaching experience and 84% (n=389) completed a valid, online evaluation of their cooperating teachers. Evaluations were considered valid or acceptable for inclusion in the study if: (a) all sections were completed, (b) only one evaluation was submitted (about 5% of the students submitted more than one evaluation), and (c) one was submitted (i.e., some failed to log on and complete an evaluation).

The Cooperating Teacher Evaluation Form

At the conclusion of the student-teaching experience, all student teachers were required to evaluate their cooperating teachers using the *Cooperating Teacher Evaluation* online tool (see Appendix A). To construct the evaluation, a review of the literature on practices of effective cooperating teachers was conducted. Our review yielded four constructs that cooperating teachers support: (a) planning, (b)

provision of feedback, (c) modeling of effective practices and engaging in discussion of effective teaching, and (d) nurturing of student teacher professional development and thinking about teaching (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Glenn, 2006; LaBoskey & Richert, 2002; Stanulis & Russell, 2000; Wang & Odell, 2002).

Since the intent of the cooperating teacher evaluation was to collect data on specific practices that could be used in the development mentoring materials for cooperating teachers, an open-ended, qualitative format was selected. The qualitative evaluation allowed student teachers the opportunity to provide specific examples of strategies, behaviors, or activities that cooperating teachers engaged in that were perceived by student teachers as contributing to their development. That is, we did not want to use a Likert-type scale that would yield information on the degree to which a cooperating teacher demonstrated a specific practice; rather, we were interested in generating a list of specific practices that student teachers (not the researchers or the literature) associated with the identified constructs (Planning, Feedback, Effective Teaching, and Professional Support). Student teachers were prompted to provide examples of how their cooperating teacher did or did not provide support for each of the four areas. The open-ended nature of the evaluation allowed student teachers to express a wide variety of thoughts, observations, and comments regarding the student teaching experience and the practices of their cooperating teachers. The use of the *Cooperating Teacher Evaluation* allowed us to collect evaluations of cooperating teachers over the course of three years yielding a rich qualitative data set that could be analyzed for evidence of consistency across reports from student teachers in regard to which practices of cooperating teachers were perceived as universally desired. The *Cooperating Teacher Evaluation* form was adopted for use by all teacher education programs in the college and was used after completion of the study to inform annual training and support of cooperating teachers.

Content analysis methodology was used to analyze the data set. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18). White and Marsh (2006) explain that researchers use analytical constructs, or rules of inference, to answer the research question at hand. For this study, the analytical constructs were derived from previous research and existing theories on mentoring student teachers. The overarching research question for the project was: Which specific practices of cooperating teachers are perceived by student teachers as helpful in their development as novice teachers?

The initial framework for the current study was based upon the belief that upon completion of their student teaching experience, student teachers could provide valuable insights on the desired practices of cooperating teachers. Further, the systematic collection of these insights over a period of years from a wide range of program areas would yield credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable data to answer the guiding research question (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985, for a discus-

sion of measures of validity and reliability in qualitative research). The *Cooperating Teacher Evaluation* was constructed to reflect the four constructs of support. Although these constructs were determined a priori through a review of existing literature on areas of support for beginning teachers, the instances of categories were not always obvious. Careful, iterative reading of the student teacher responses was required in order to identify the concepts and patterns with the data. Multiple readings of the data generated the first set of categories.

Once the initial set of categories had been identified, specific student teacher statements were coded with a "1" or a "0." These codes were placed in a column, "Affirmation of Category" in order to generate a count of specific comments that affirmed the development of that category (see Table 1). Statements that reflected or affirmed the category received a "1", and statements that did not reflect the category received a "0." Statements receiving a "0" reflected ideas or practices unrelated to the category. For example, under the category of "pre-planning," a comment of "I loved her planning book and use of different colored pens for planning" would be coded as a "0" as it does not directly affirm the category. The statement does affirm that the cooperating teacher engaged in planning but not that pre-planning specifically aided in the student teacher's development. Disconfirming evidence, on the other hand, were statements in direct contrast to category. A statement such as, "I loved his spontaneous, unplanned teaching style," would have been coded as disconfirming evidence. Disconfirming evidence were highlighted and separately coded with a "1" in a column, "Disconfirming Evidence." If disconfirming evidence exceeded 5% of the total number of comments, a category was discarded. Our findings are presented in terms of the final categories that emerged from the data analysis process.

Findings

Data from the study reveal a common set of practices deemed desirable by student teachers. The practices were either specifically identified (e.g., "My teacher did…" or "I appreciated how my teacher did…") or identified in the form of a sug-

Table 1

Number of Comments Affirming Categories

Category	Number of Comments (Percentage)	
Pre-planning	363	(93%)
Sharing of Resources	64	(16%)
Constructive, Specific Feedback	337	(87%)
Multi-Modal Feedback Including Written Feedback	64	(16%)
Cooperating Teacher Modeling of Effective Practices	341	(88%)
Practices Demonstrating Trust and Confidence	213	(55%)

gestion (e.g., "It would have been helpful if she…"). Six categories emerged from the analysis: (a) advance planning, (b) the sharing of resources, (c) the provision of constructive, specific feedback, (d) multi-modal feedback including written feedback, (e) cooperating teacher modeling of effective practices, and (f) practices demonstrating trust and confidence (see Table 1).

Advance Planning

In the area of planning, the overall finding was that student teachers desired advance planning. Providing the student teacher with advance notice of what was to be taught was the most commonly identified desired behavior or suggestion for mentors. The planning did not need to be formal but tools such as planning guides, timelines, or curriculum maps of topics to be covered were identified as valued and essential by the student teachers. In contrast to the positive regard the student teachers expressed for advance planning, last minute planning or no planning was identified as problematic:

> I found planning difficult because he plans so quickly before class begins.
>
> Even though I felt confident in planning lessons and units on my own, perhaps in the future more time might be spent on discussing unit plans and lessons. I often did this on my own and while I appreciate [my teacher's] confidence in me and willingness to let me 'have at it!' others might not feel as such and need more support in this area in the future.
>
> [My cooperating teacher] does a lot of last minute planning, so sometimes it's not clear to me how we are going to run class and how I fit in, if I'm suppose to.

Sharing of Resources

The second area of planning that was consistently identified in the evaluations was the sharing of resources. The student teachers frequently commented on how appreciative they were to have access to years of acquired lesson materials:

> The abundance of resources that both she and [her co-teacher] had available was also very helpful for planning because there was a great deal of material to pull information from.
>
> [My cooperating teacher] gave me wonderful support with my planning by providing me with good ideas and the materials I could use.
>
> [My cooperating teacher] provided me with a wealth of resources to aid my planning.

Constructive, Specific Feedback

In the area of feedback, student teachers universally appreciated meaningful and useful feedback. Overall, student teachers favored cooperating teachers who gave frequent feedback that included specific suggestions. Many of the student

teachers identified the practice of "beginning with the positive" as important yet acknowledged the desire for constructive, specific suggestions. Over and over student teachers expressed the desire for their cooperating teachers to provide specific and concrete comments.

> [My cooperating teacher] provided me with useful feedback. She always highlighted the positive and gave suggestions for improvement.

> More importantly, [my cooperating teacher] did not shy away from examining or constructively criticizing my teaching or interactions with other teachers when she felt it necessary. I felt that her feedback was always helpful, always honest, and delivered at all times with respect and kindness.

Student teachers whose cooperating teachers did not provide positive, frequent, or specific feedback offered some of the following observations or suggestions:

> I would suggest that she develop a method where she ensures that first she states at least one positive remark before stating the negative.

> I would have liked a little more detailed/descriptive feedback, such as what other ways I could teach the lesson or what to do when things get out of hand.

> More specific feedback for both behavior management and instruction. For example, in a tough situation, say 'Right now I would _____.' Also, feedback on lessons before teaching them may have helped ensure success and build confidence early on.

> Feedback was fairly limited, especially positive feedback. As a result, I found myself less confident in my own teaching.

Multi-Modal Feedback

In addition to specific, frequent feedback, the student teachers also expressed a preference for a variety of modes of feedback, particularly written feedback:

> [My cooperating teacher] gave me feedback in several ways: written comments on lesson plans, informal notes during teaching, verbal comments after teaching, and a formal weekly assessment (written).

> I wish he had written more of his feedback for me down so that I can look back on it.

> Although her feedback was thorough and helpful, I would prefer some written feedback.

> It was helpful for me to write down her comments as she gave them to us, so that I could remember them later. I had tried to remember her comments without writing them down and was afraid that I had missed something important.

> It was always very informal feedback, and my mind is not very good at remembering some things, so I did not always remember the constructive criticism.

Modeling Effective Practices

Under the category of effective practice, the remarks of the student teachers could be grouped into three different categories. Novices highlighted their cooperating teachers' ability to model effective (a) instructional practices, (b) classroom management strategies/approaches, and (c) ways to promote access to instruction through personal or emotional support of the students.

Instructional Practices. In the category of effective instructional practices, student teachers would name specific practices that they felt were representative of effective or evidenced-based practices. In addition, they would frequently discuss the assessment of students as integral (or one and the same) as effective instruction. Representative comments included:

> One thing that I will take with me is the practice of having a summary at the end of the lesson to reiterate what was taught. I really liked this idea because it kept me grounded by making me think what it was that I wanted the kids to get out of the lesson and also benefited the kids in that they got a summary of what they were supposed to get out of it.

> I like the way that technology [SmartBoard™] is integrated into the classroom.

Classroom Management. When discussing how effective cooperating teachers modeled classroom management strategies, the student teachers consistently identified "routines" as the key to success. The routines and procedures were not perceived as rigid or limiting, rather they provided a calm environment for the students in the class:

> There are a lot of routines in her class which makes it easier for students to stay on top of their work.

> [My cooperating teacher's] strong focus on the routines in the classroom provide a safe and comfortable space for children to learn.

> I have also learned the value of routines in any classroom. Almost everything we do in her class is part of a grander routine or standard procedure that allows the students to function more independently.

> [For example,] not taking misbehavior personally, setting clear expectations with rubrics and routine—that students like this clarity and it helps them perform at higher levels, reflecting on his own ideals for good teaching tactics and good professional behavior —he was just a good model.

Student Support. A final area of modeling effective teaching emerged from the data. This final category reflected those things that the cooperating teacher did in order to reach and teach all students in the class. From differentiating instruction to establishing rapport with students, the student teacher identified these practices as having a distinct impact:

> She plans lessons so that all students have an equal opportunity to learn. I also

observed many occasions where she would take her time and effort to help a child with instructional difficulties or a personal issue.

She was always making a point (most evident during planning time) to include a variety of lesson methods and to ensure that the needs of every student was being met through effective lessons—and again, modeled for me before letting me take over.

The atmosphere that she creates in her classroom is so comfortable that all students feel safe and excited to learn!

He knows his students. He gets them up out of their seats. He relates the content to their lives.

Trust and Confidence

Under the area of supporting the student teachers professional identity and thinking about the profession, the novices identified "being treated as an equal" as an important feature in their development. Student teachers felt respected when their cooperating teachers displayed confidence and trust in them, often through overt actions, such as freedom to try new approaches or allowing novices a role when working with colleagues or parents. Comments included:

She supported me and introduced me as a colleague to students and parents.

[My cooperating teacher] offered me many opportunities to try new activities and gave me plenty of freedom to experiment with my own style.

She has always made me feel like an equal in her classroom. From the first day of school until my last day there, the students were unaware that I was a 'student teacher' and not just another teacher in the room. She also treated me equally when it came to parents. During the semester I attended parent-teacher conferences, child study meetings, and back to school night. At each of these, I was encouraged to communicate with the parents and I felt like my ideas and opinions were valued.

My confidence grew as a result of the confidence she had in my ability to handle the responsibility.

Discussion

The findings from the study complement many of the recommendations in the literature on cooperating teachers and support of student teachers. Several of the findings, however, provide focus and new insights on standard recommendations for the mentoring practices of cooperating teachers. In our discussion, we highlight three of our findings that shed new light on recommendations for cooperating teachers and can be translated into concrete practices for the professional development of cooperating teachers: (1) the role of "technical-rational support" in relationship to the concept of "transformative" mentoring; (2) the tension between the provision of ideas and suggestions and the ability to allow student teachers to explore and

experiment within the classroom; and (3) the relationship between good teachers and successful mentors.

The literature on cooperating teachers consistently ranks "provision of feedback" as one of the top desired traits (Birrell & Bullough, 2005; Killian & Wilkins, 2009; Wilkins-Canter, 1996). Mentoring training models place high value on what is referred to in the literature as "scaffolding or collaborative mentoring" (Granott, 1993) or "cognitive coaching" (Costa & Garmston, 1994). In these types of models, mentors do not provide explicit suggestions or recommendations; rather, they guide the novice through questions and probes in order to allow the student teacher the opportunity to reflect upon their own practice and internalize a mindset for evaluating his or her own practice. While it is true that this form of mentoring can be very powerful and effective, our findings indicate that student teachers also appreciate explicit, concrete suggestions as they develop their teaching skills. The facilitative model assumes that the student teacher possesses the requisite background knowledge to "see the big picture" and a deep knowledge of teaching behaviors in order to identify desirable options. This assumption may be faulty given the limited amount of time in the classroom that most student teachers have prior to their student teaching internship.

Our data suggest that student teachers want frequent, direct feedback that includes specific suggestions *and* they want the high quality questions that prompt them to reflect upon their own practice, decision-making, and beliefs about teaching. Given this dual desire, cooperating teachers should consider ways to balance the *type* of feedback provided as well as consider *when* to provide different types of feedback. That is, it appears that student teachers have a developmental need for concrete feedback (i.e., "Give me ideas and suggestions for improvement") and a professional need to think and explore their concepts of teaching through skillful prompting (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). A balance would be to provide that "in the moment" explicit feedback but also set aside specific time to promote student teacher reflection and introspection on teaching; that is, time for facilitative mentoring. If we believe that high quality teaching requires both the development of specific behaviors that contribute to student learning and the development of a mindset that will influence future behavior, the balance of both concrete/instructional feedback and facilitative feedback is necessary.

Another complexity that arises in the literature on student teachers is the seemingly contradictory desire for student teachers to receive explicit guidance (e.g., follow the modeling of cooperating teacher) and to have the freedom to explore new teaching styles or instructional approaches (Koerner, O'Connell-Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002). Our data reflect student teacher desire to experience both direct modeling and freedom to experiment. Frequently the same student teacher would compliment his or her cooperating teacher on how the teacher was a great model of this or that strategy *and* remark on the freedom provided to him or her to try new things and experiment within the classroom. Thus, it is possible for teacher

to be the model of how to effectively teach, manage, or interact, while also allowing the student teacher to try new strategies or work with students in the class in different ways. The literature on teacher education speaks to an "accountability culture" (Cochran-Smith, 2005) and links this pressure to student teachers. The assumption is that the classroom teacher, who is ultimately accountable for the instructional outcomes in the classroom, will place more pressure on the student teacher to teach in the same manner and style thus ensuring similar outcomes. Yet, even in our "high stakes" placements—classrooms with state end-of-year exams or AP proficiency exams—we identified cooperating teachers who viewed student teachers as opportunities for the infusion of new ideas, strategies, and approaches.

Our third finding stems from the frequently expressed sentiment, "Not all good teachers make good mentors." Our data suggest that a more appropriate statement should be, "Only good teachers can be good mentors." That is, the majority of the student teachers who identified their cooperating teacher as contributing value to their development noted that these mentors modeled what they preached. High quality cooperating teachers not only coached and supported these student teachers, they also provided an example of how to be a good teacher. This finding has implications for both the identification of cooperating teachers and the professional development of mentors. First, cooperating teachers should be identified as high quality teachers prior to their selection. Second, training or professional development of cooperating teachers should include content or grade-level relevant information. Student teachers commented on how these "inspiring teachers" used research-based strategies, the latest technology, and continually kept themselves up-to-date in their respective fields. This finding aligns with suggestions on how mentoring can align with "standards-based" teaching expectations and beliefs (Blasé, 2009).

In summary, our findings suggest that highly valued cooperating teachers have an innate respect for the developmental needs of the student teacher. A Maslowian analogy applies. Student teachers appreciated having their "basic needs" of technical and emotional support met. Cooperating teachers who provided such support were also successful in pushing student teachers to explore their beliefs and assumptions about teaching by prompting them to try new things and allowing them time and space to reflect upon their personal perspectives of teaching.

> [My CT] constantly provided the positive reinforcement and encouragement I needed to get through my student teaching. She has shown me that a good teacher is constantly learning from colleagues and always adapting to fit the needs of students. I was so fortunate to have [her] as my CT as she refused to allow me to get discouraged through my learning process.

> [My CT] provided constant advice, support, approval, and optimism toward both my teaching and learning. She raised my confidence in my abilities, and while she established a productive learning environment for our students, she has managed to do the same for me!

> [My CT] was very positive and supportive. He provided space so that it was a great learning experience, but enough support that I never felt overwhelmed.

Finally, those cooperating teachers who demonstrated through their daily actions the belief that all students can learn inspired their student teachers. True applications of social justice were identified by student teachers when they saw, first hand, their mentor teachers engaging in such practices. Comments presented earlier such as "all students have an equal opportunity to learn" and "[the teaching environment is so] comfortable that all students feel safe and excited to learn!" reflect the basic tenants of social justice—that teaching can be transformative to all students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009).

Conclusions

The personality and teaching styles of student teachers and cooperating teachers alike vary greatly and yet, reflections of student teachers on the desired traits and skills of cooperating teachers generate a consistent set of recommendations. The findings from the study provide specific suggestions for the professional development and support of cooperating teachers. Highly valued cooperating teachers engaged in the following practices: (a) setting aside time to engage in one-on-one mentoring discussions with the student teacher, (b) providing concrete feedback and suggestions on a regular basis, (c) providing feedback in a variety of formats (e.g., written, verbal, modeling), (d) allowing students to experiment and explore new teaching strategies, and (e) including the student teacher in all aspects of their professional life (meetings, professional development, extracurricular involvements, etc.), thereby communicating these values to potential cooperating teachers in advance of the student teaching experience.

Professional development, whether it be cooperating teacher training or student teaching manuals/guides, should stress the importance of: (a) advance planning, (b) strategies for providing feedback (e.g., setting aside specific time each week for mentoring conversations; using a variety of observation and feedback tools; identifying strengths and communicating areas for improvement; avoiding general feedback), (c) modeling and "thinking aloud" effective practices (e.g., research-based instructional strategies, assessment strategies, content resources, following up with challenging behaviors, working with parents, collaborating with colleagues), and (d) strategies to foster student teacher growth and development that include encouragement and access. Kahn's (2001) interviews of cooperating teachers revealed their desire for inservice support on how to mentor more effectively. Teacher preparation programs can take advantage of that interest by professionalizing the training and support of cooperating teachers.

In 1998, Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon lamented the need for more research on supervising/cooperating teachers. Over a decade later, more is known about who serves as cooperating teachers, what cooperating teachers value in terms of their

relationships to teacher preparation programs, and interactions among cooperating teachers and student teachers (Glenn, 2006; Graham, 2006; Killian and Wilkins, 2009). It is time to begin the transformative work of ensuring that the teachers selected to serve as cooperating teachers are provided the necessary support and direction to ensure that exemplary mentoring practices occur within student teaching internships.

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Appendix A

Mentor Teacher Evaluation: Student Teacher Form

Directions:
Provide specific comments for each of the following mentoring and supervisory domains.

Focus Areas	Strengths (List specific things that your cooperating teacher did to foster development in these areas)	Suggestions for Improvement (List specific things that would have improved the quality of your experience)
Planning	Note: Online form had an expanding table in order to fit student teacher comments.	
Feedback		
Effective Practices Instruction Management Collaboration		
Nurturing Professional Development		