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Mara Sapon-Shevin and Kelly Chandler-Olcott

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STUDENT COHORTS

COMMUNITIES OF CRITIQUE OR DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES?

Mara Sapon-Shevin
Kelly Chandler-Olcott
Syracuse University

The study was designed to trouble the commonsense notion in the field that cohorts, groups of students who move through an educational program together, provide the optimal structure for preparing future teachers. Using collaborative inductive methods, this study by two university researchers of their teaching within a preservice education program explored the following questions: What is the relationship between the positive aspects of being a community and students' ability and willingness to become critical practitioners? What happens to relationships between students and between students and faculty when there are ruptures or critical incidents within the community? How is the role of faculty members teaching cohorts different from the role of faculty members teaching classes organized in more traditional ways? The study raises questions about various factors that affect community within the cohort and about differences between students' and faculty's perceptions of critical ruptures within the classroom.

Students in our teacher education program were participating in a class on cooperative learning that was collaboratively planned and taught by the three faculty, including ourselves, who taught methods courses to this cohort that semester. After a discussion of the principles of cooperative learning and a read-aloud of a predictable book, we placed students in randomly assigned small groups to conceptualize their own book with a predictable pattern and to draw the book jacket and illustration. Special attention was given to the social skills that would be required for the group to work cooperatively, including consensus building and balanced participation in the final product.

As we walked around checking on students' progress, Mara heard John,¹ an assertive male student, saying loudly that his group should write a book about a pig who was in jail. He proposed that the pattern be about other animals asking why the pig had been sent to jail and the pig describing various crimes. In the end, it would be revealed that the pig was in a zoo.

Both of us were concerned about the appropriateness of this topic, but, after a brief consultation, we decided to see what happened during the presentations before we intervened.

Serving as the spokesperson for his group, John explained the pattern, the twist, and the accompanying illustration of the pig in jail. Although the rest of the class was asked for feedback on each presentation, no one made any comments about this story's content. After all of the presentations were over, Mara facilitated a discussion of process, asking each group to talk about how it made decisions. Karen, an older-than-average returning student and one of very few working-class students in the cohort, raised her hand and said that her group, the one led by John, did not get along very well: "I had some different opinions, but the group didn't listen. But that's okay. It was a majority." Karen was initially reluctant to describe the disagreement, but our repeated questions led her to admit she was uncomfortable with the book's content. She felt that kids whose parents were in jail would

be very troubled by the way the book made light of prison. "Well, this would give them a better perspective on jail," John scoffed. Even after both of us discussed the need to consider books' content carefully, John insisted that we were making a big deal of nothing and that the pig story would be fun for kids. No one else in the class said anything, although one student did ask in a written evaluation of class whether it was "appropriate to criticize the pig project in such a 'public' manner."

Although the professional literature on teacher education tends to talk glowingly about the advantages of preparing students within cohort groups, the previous story, described more fully in Sapon-Shevin and Chandler (1999), presents an alternative image of cohorts as learning communities. Although specific details of their structure vary from university to university, *cohorts* are generally defined as groups of students who move through their teacher education program together, sharing coursework and developing a sense of community and support.

Many studies of cohorts emphasize the benefits of preservice teachers experiencing collaborative learning environments. Writing about a graduate teacher education cohort group, Burnaford and Hobson (1995) stated that being part of a cohort enables students to learn "in a climate of cooperation and trust" (p. 69), experiencing the sense of community and practicing the group process skills they will implement in their own classrooms. According to these authors, "Building community in their classrooms with young children is supported by the individual teachers' participation in a similar group of their own peers" (p. 69).

Peterson et al. (1995) shared their study of a preservice teacher education program that used flexible thematic cohorts. Their cohort groups—15 to 30 teacher candidates who begin and complete a program together—are described positively, and the only "disadvantages" they described relate primarily to structural complications (scheduling, faculty load, etc.).

In a study comparing the perceptions of students in two different teacher preparation programs, both of which used student cohort

groups, Kelly and Dietrich (1995) found that "the cohort configuration appeared to be a powerful force in the success of these two dissimilar groups" (p. 8). They also stated that

the confidence expressed by both groups of students prior to student teaching/internship may be attributed to strong support and a sense of community provided by members of their cohort. Peers provide educational and emotional support through study groups and informal peer counseling. This group identity, which remains for several years after graduation, helps build confidence as students begin their professional careers. (p. 5)

The expectation is that because students know one another well and have a shared history, they will help one another become better teachers. Some evidence exists that this is not always the case. For example, in a study of preservice teacher education cohorts at a southeastern university, Radencich et al. (1998) examined the culture of cohorts. They began with the assertion that "the continuing and mutual support of such a plan results in positive academic and social gains" (p. 109) is largely unexplored. In their study, they used faculty and student focus groups as well as other data sources to examine the culture of four different elementary and early childhood student cohort groups. They found that team cultures were almost bimodal: "on the whole very positive or almost pathological" (p. 112). The influences they identified on the development of that team culture included "the family-like context of teams, the otherness felt by professors and students not members of teams, cliques, group pressure, cooperative assignments, academic performance, professors, and team supervisors" (p. 112).

Although our teacher-education colleagues' public stances about their cohort groups were generally positive, we had both had private conversations in less formal settings that yielded a different picture, one more in line with negative findings by Radencich et al. (1998). Many teacher educators shared with us stories of cohorts gone wrong. Colleagues expressed puzzlement about what makes a good or a bad cohort and how that might be affected by factors within or outside their control.

The research on which we have embarked was designed to trouble the commonsense no-

tion in the field about cohorts, particularly the relationship between student cohorts and future teachers' abilities to become critical, reflective practitioners. By breaking what Newkirk (1992) would call the "silences" in our public teaching stories about the group dynamics of cohorts and their effect on teaching and learning, we hoped to come to understand student cohorts more fully and refine our teaching within them. We were interested in exploring the extent to which a student cohort with a strong sense of community is the optimal setting for developing the skills of critical reflection. Our research questions can be summarized as follows:

1. What is the relationship between the positive aspects of being a community and the ability and willingness of students to become critical practitioners?
2. What happens to relationships between students and between students and faculty when there are ruptures or critical incidents within the community?
3. How is the role of faculty members teaching cohorts different from the role of faculty members teaching classes organized in more traditional ways?

This article touches on each of these questions, but it deals most fully with the second, the one related to critical incidents in the cohort.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

Our student informants were enrolled in the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Teacher Education Program at Syracuse University. This program is designed to prepare teachers to work in inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms with a wide range of learners. Students in the program receive certification in both elementary and special education. They are largely middle- to upper-class White women, although, in a typical semester, there may be two to four men, two to four students of color, and two to four students older than 20 to 21.

Students move through the program in cohorts of 30 to 40, and they are together for all of their education courses during the last 2 years of their program. We are two of the four faculty members who work in what is commonly

known as the First Professional Block, or Block I for short. Mara teaches EED 308, Strategies of Teaching; and Kelly teaches EED 334, Elementary Language Arts Methods and Curriculum. Two other faculty members teach reading methods and the field experience seminar. During Block I, students are together every morning from 8:30 to 12:00. Students stay together as a cohort for the remainder of their methods courses and student teaching over two subsequent semesters.

PERSONAL CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

We come to this research with a shared commitment to constructivist teaching (Brooks & Brooks, 1993), acknowledging that learners construct understandings by drawing on their particular experiences, beliefs, and dispositions. We both believe it is important for teachers to make their pedagogical decision making transparent and to discuss those choices with students who are learning to become teachers. Although we are responsible for different content, we thread issues of power, inequities, and justice throughout our instruction and feel that students can only discuss these hard issues within the context of a strong learning community. We hope that students who learn to be members of a community within their preservice education program will be better equipped to foster community within their own elementary classrooms. In addition, each of us brought her own agenda to the research process.

Mara. Building a classroom community is extremely important to me and has been the focus of my writing and research for nearly 20 years. I am particularly interested in the role that the teacher plays in setting the tone for student-student interaction. My course, Strategies of Teaching, focuses explicitly on issues of community building, conflict resolution, and dealing with issues of diversity. I have been troubled for some time by instances when my attempts to build community have been disrupted by particular events or student behaviors. Nearly every semester, several critical incidents have

challenged my beliefs about the powerful role that the teacher plays in building the community.

This research was an attempt to take something that had been bothering me for some time and turn it into a research question. Studying my own practice systematically seemed like a helpful way to feel more powerful in the face of situations and interactions that troubled me. Finding a colleague, Kelly, with whom to pursue this question was enormously exciting. I felt less isolated by the dilemma and the surrounding decisions and also that my teaching relationship with Kelly would be greatly strengthened by sharing a common question. Having another set of ears and eyes and another mind focused on the same question felt very positive; having a companion in the search made me feel like it was both doable and desirable. I was eager to avoid feeling either completely responsible when things went badly (with the accompanying feelings of discouragement and self-blame) or retreating to feeling completely blameless for the troubling events, with no necessity for reflection or analysis. Tackling this topic together seemed like it would provide time and a structured space for figuring out some possible solutions to the dilemma.

Kelly. This project was important for me because I was a new faculty member at Syracuse University when we began. Although I had taught several methods courses as an adjunct instructor during my doctoral program, I had no previous experience with a cohort model. Early on in my first semester as an assistant professor, I discovered that such a model had costs as well as benefits, but I didn't have a repertoire of strategies from previous teaching to deal with those costs. Focusing on the tensions with an experienced faculty member reduced my stress and helped me to problem-solve in this new context.

I also welcomed the opportunity to inquire about my own practice because my research agenda centers on teacher-research processes. In addition to a 4-year collaboration with a schoolwide research collective in Maine, I consult with several groups of teachers in central New York who are exploring classroom-based

inquiry. To help these teachers reach their goals and to have credibility with them as a partner, I need to engage in similar kinds of research in my classroom setting.

Last, but certainly not least, community is a central concept that my students and I explore in the context of writing instruction. Because I see the construction of texts as a socially mediated process, it's important for my students to think about the ways that community—or its lack—affects what can be said, or not said, in a given classroom. In my course, we spend a lot of time participating in, and then debriefing, the kinds of activities that literacy experts advocate for young learners. Without a healthy community, these activities break down and become less effective as learning tools. I hoped that our research would help me better orchestrate a learning environment in which students can reflect on the implications of community for their language arts teaching while participating in such a community as learners.

METHOD

Although teacher research has received increasing attention as a way for K-12 practitioners to prompt educational change (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994), increase professionalism (Goswami & Stillman, 1987), and contribute new knowledge about teaching to their fields (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), it has not been as widely embraced by college teachers. Pointing out the irony that many university faculty members are well trained in research methods but willing to use those skills only in others' classrooms, Short (1993) argued that "Teacher research can provide a new perspective on teaching and learning for college educators because it asks them to examine their own teaching and its implications for themselves as well as the broader educational field" (p. 156).

Our project was intended to address both of these concerns: to improve our own work with Block I students and to contribute to larger conversations about community building at the university level and cohorts as an organizational structure for teacher education. We also had a third purpose. Just as we meant to model

the benefits of team teaching and collaboration to our students by our joint planning and teaching of shared classes, we also meant to model the benefits of formal classroom inquiry with our research. We believed that our program's graduates would be more likely to adopt this approach to improve their own teaching if they had seen their professors engage in it as well.

Although college-level teacher research is less common than elementary- or secondary-level research, a number of studies have been published in recent years that resemble our own in approach or topic choice. In an exploration of team teaching at the university level, Blenkinsop and Bailey (1997) conducted research on their own attempts to integrate language arts and science courses in a middle-grades teacher education program. Clyde and Condon (1996) teamed up to study their undergraduate students' use of talk in a teacher education course on oral language in the classroom. Both research teams found it invaluable to be able to cross-check their conclusions with another researcher who had a different perspective from theirs but shared their intimate knowledge of student informants.

Other studies discuss university teachers' attempts to problem-solve through ruptures or snags in their teaching as we have. Although Guilfoyle (1995) expected that students would embrace the student-centered approaches she initiated in her graduate and undergraduate literacy courses, many resisted her methods both actively and passively. By studying her struggles systematically over a 3-year period, she was able to make adjustments in her assignments and expectations that reduced students' stress while achieving her goals. After identifying the detrimental effects of several racially driven cliques, Poynor (1998) studied the factors affecting classroom community in her reading methods class. According to students, the opportunity to share their ideas, feelings of value, and having a teacher who cared were the three most important factors for a good sense of community to exist in a classroom. That each of these teachers was able to glean insights from squaring up to a teaching challenge rather than ignoring it has been encouraging for us as we

explore the silences and tensions around community in our own classes.

As Fecho (2000) pointed out and several of these studies demonstrate, the teacher researcher's status as an insider can be both the "biggest asset and biggest liability" of practitioner research (p. 376). In our case, we had a rich sense of the context in which the data was embedded as well as a deep commitment to its analysis. At the same time, our ability to distance ourselves from the data was reduced. Our actions as teachers affected the research context on a continuous basis, making it difficult to determine what patterns were attributable to the dynamics of a particular group, our own instructional choices and approaches, or a third, often unknown, factor. Fortunately, working as a team helped to ameliorate some of these issues as it built a cross-checking system into our design and helped us to see beyond ourselves.

Data Collection

We have been collecting data on our student cohorts across a 2-year (four-cohort) period. Because the systematicness and nature of our data collection as well as our research questions have shifted over time, looking at our data over a number of cohorts allows us to raise additional questions of both content and methodology.

During the fall 1998 semester, we collected no data beyond our regular teaching notes and artifacts. We did meet on a regular basis to discuss the cohort, to raise concerns about individual students, and to plan shared classes.

In the spring of 1999, written data from students was collected naturally in the course of our teaching. For example, when a critical incident occurred during a shared class, we were able to analyze the anonymous evaluations of that class that we always gather from students after team-taught classes. When another critical incident occurred in *Strategies of Teaching*, Mara asked students to write in response to a whole-class discussion—an approach both of us commonly use to debrief and reflect on class activities.

During the fall 1999 semester, we added some data-collection strategies that were specifically tied to our research questions. Our primary source of information was student writing in response to questions about characteristics of a strong community, barriers to the formation of that community, and personal difficulties about being a community member. Because this writing was completed as an out-of-class assignment several weeks into the semester, students were aware of our personal beliefs about community as well as the ways we worked to foster it in our teaching. These were particularly evident during our first shared class, which had community building and getting to know each other as its explicit topics, topics that were communicated to students at the top of the day's agenda that they all received.

Concerned that the previous data set of student writing was muddled by the influence of these factors, we changed our data-collection approach in the spring of 2000. We asked students to respond to two questions in writing at the beginning of our first class, before any of us had the opportunity to talk about his or her philosophies or to demonstrate them with instructional activities. The questions, along with a brief anticipatory set, were as follows:

As you already know, Block I is a connected set of courses that you will be taking with the same group of students this semester. As a result of this program structure, you will be part of a learning community. What do you think might be the positive aspects of participating in this community? What do you think might be the negative aspects of participating in this community?

We felt these questions would provide us with more valid baseline data than our previous approach, although we recognize that even they have their limitations given students' probable desire to present themselves in positive ways. About three quarters of the way through the semester, we e-mailed students their individual responses from January and asked them to comment on them using the following questions as a guide:

- What positive aspects that you wrote about have come to pass? What positive aspects have there been that you didn't anticipate in January?

- What negative aspects that you wrote about have come to pass? What negative aspects have there been that you didn't anticipate in January?

In all four semesters, we gathered anecdotal data from our teaching journals and notes from our research conversations. The latter was particularly important to us because, like Hollinsworth and Sockett (1994), we see conversation as both a legitimate method of data collection and a way to begin preliminary data analysis.

Data Analysis

We used a collaborative, inductive approach to data analysis. Each of us read through students' responses independently before we talked to each other, and then Mara made an initial pass through the data, noting preliminary codes on sticky notes. Kelly read through Mara's codes, added some new ones, and then sorted and collapsed the entire list into a smaller number of categories. We refined these new codes together, then reapplied them to the data, eliminating those that did not reflect our research questions or apply to more than one piece of information. This process was not an attempt to achieve interrater reliability, as each of us saw the data with a unique lens because of our different backgrounds and experiences. Instead, we intended to coconstruct categories and codes through our talk rather than arriving at them independently and cross-checking our impressions with each other.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semester 1

An experience during this semester had a profound effect on our understanding of the complexity of cohorts as an organizational structure for instruction. Many of the students enrolled in the Block I methods courses were also taking another course that was not a part of the methods block. A critical incident occurred during that outside course that provoked strong feelings among many students that became very obvious in the block classes. Students would make caustic remarks about the situa-

tion, the instructor, and the content. This placed us in a challenging situation, which can be summarized as follows:

- Something was happening in another context that affected our student cohort.
- We did not have full, accurate information about the situation, and it was difficult to ascertain more information.
- Students began coming to us with tales of the other class and demands for “action,” wanting to tell their side of the story.
- Although we wanted very much to support the faculty instructor of the other course, we struggled with the seeming conflict of our roles as student allies and professional colleagues.

In other words, something that was a shared experience for many of the cohort members was something that we as methods professors could not easily access or intervene to change. This situation is closely related to our second and third research questions relating to critical incidents and the role of faculty members vis-à-vis the student cohort. We struggled not only with how to respond to a disruptive incident within our own cohort but also with how to maintain supportive, appropriate relationships with other faculty members within and outside the cohort.

Semester 2

This cohort brought us experiences and data of another kind. Throughout the semester, there had been tensions between different students, particularly when issues regarding race were discussed. There were definite cliques in the cohort, manifested by seating patterns and work-partner choices. On the last day of class in *Strategies of Teaching*, an eruption occurred. Students performing a role-play about racism and prejudice were yelled at by another student who didn't distinguish the roles the students were playing from their personal feelings. Attempts to process what had happened became the occasion for more anger, shouting, and hurt feelings. After the break, Mara made another attempt to talk about the issues and the importance of community, but the class ended with no resolution and a good deal of emotion. Students were asked to write down what they

were feeling and what they thought needed to happen.

That written data indicated that students were uniformly upset. Some said they felt like crying. Many said they were scared by what had happened; others were angry. Many mentioned the group's lack of respect. “I feel that there are a lot of different groups and nobody tries to have respect,” one said. “I think there are more personal attacks on individuals than people saying what they think. I feel by some people I have been degraded and called a bad teacher. I did not pay \$28,000 to hear that.”

According to another:

I feel insulted, offended and laughed at. I noticed how people would talk and others laugh at their comments. I noticed disrespect for peoples' feelings, intelligence and time (when people are speaking). Right now I am shaken up so I am not able to process all my thoughts and what I am feeling.

One connected the conflict to her future teaching:

I leave today's class with the idea that I am going to be a horrible teacher because I am immature and stupid. I am not prepared to deal with people in this world! [This was said by one of the students to the other students]. I am scared to go out into schools! This class could have been an incredible community with the exception of a few. We cannot end our Block like this! Something needs to be done NOW!!!!

Many students said that the atmosphere in the class made them feel unsafe or unwilling to say what they thought. As one explained, “I am scared to talk because they will personally attack me. I felt bad for L___ today because she was crying but didn't want to say anything because the security and safety does not exist in this community.” Another wrote,

We resort to name calling instead of compromising—in hopes to reach some common grounds. We look at comments as personal attacks and that is not a safe place for us to share. Without safety there is nothing, only fear to share.

Several students commented that others in the cohort did not listen well. “This class was supposed to be about building communities and I believe it completely destroyed what little

community we had," one wrote. "People dislike each other in here—we all know that. But those who complain about all of us not listening are the ones who throw snide comments around that are really insulting."

Another was similarly critical of her peers:

I feel like everything in this class turns into a debate. . . . One person hears one thing, completely disagrees, and attacks that person. It turns into an "I'm right, you're wrong" issue, not a content issue. We all need to learn to listen to our very diverse opinions and how to respond to them constructively and respectfully.

Some students spoke directly to the question of whether being a community meant that everyone had to be friends:

This is a support system. It is *not* about making best friends. Respect is not something that is happening in this class because people do not open their minds to others' views.

I don't think that a community is a circle of friends. Rather, it is a group of people who can learn from each other!!! WE can't do that the way things are.

I am not best friends with everyone in Block I, however I try to be open-minded, showing respect for my peers and not attacking them for their opinions.

Several students made connections beyond the Block I community and considered the implications for their future teaching, insights that related directly to our first research question. "How can we expect to teach children and work within a school with other teachers and administrators if we don't extend the same courtesy to our classmates?" one asked. "I feel as though the problems of society were just acted out in this classroom," wrote another. A third considered even broader implications, drawing on recent events in the news:

I think that to change the hatred and violence in society, we all need to be able to interact with each other. Peace isn't something we discuss, it's something we do, and it horrified me to see that the future teachers in this classroom can't do it. What happened in Littleton [Colorado] can't change until what happened in here changes.

Only three students directly mentioned the role of faculty in their comments. Two students

blamed their teachers for having a role in the lack of community, saying that faculty did not have enough contact with students or know them well enough to build community. But two students said that faculty *had* done well in establishing a community because they felt they could go to everyone else in the class as a colleague for support.

Only a few students felt that this blow-up was part of the process of becoming a community and were more hopeful. One wrote about feeling

personally disappointed because I feel people think our community was a failure and it is hopeless. That is just as bad as the teacher who has one bad experience with cooperative group work and gives up. I think the fact that we had this conversation today shows potential for a community of respect and possible understanding.

According to another, "Community is something that is an ongoing process. Conflict will happen, it's how we resolve them that matters."

The semester with this cohort was very difficult for faculty. Whereas the blow-up occurred in one person's class, it reverberated throughout the rest of the program. It also occasioned new thinking about the expectations we were giving students about what it meant to "be a community." We wondered how they developed the expectation that they would all be friends or that a good community never had any conflicts. How did we as faculty contribute to those expectations? Did students' conceptions of community set them up for major disruptions or make them more disappointed and distressed when those critical incidents occurred?

Semester 3

In this semester, we focused on understanding how students defined community. We felt that differences in students' definitions across the 30-person cohort, as well as differences between their definitions and our own, might explain some of the ruptures or critical incidents we had observed with previous groups. For this reason, we asked students to write, from their perspectives, about the five most crucial charac-

teristics of a healthy community as well as the five most significant barriers to establishing that kind of community. Although, as we mentioned earlier, this data was gathered in the midst of the semester—making it subject to influences from our explicit teaching about community—the trends and patterns were still of interest to us, and we include them here.

The most commonly cited characteristics of a strong community were respect, caring, encouragement, and cooperation. Students also discussed the importance of healthy communication practices, with honesty and careful listening—the very things their predecessors felt were lacking—earning high marks.

The cohort was split on whether friendship between members was a necessary characteristic of a strong community. Some agreed with the student who argued, “It is important that classmates are friends with each other or like each other in order to develop trust and security.” Others saw another student’s point that it was necessary to “be friendly to one another” but not necessarily to “become the best of friends.”

Trust was another commonly cited characteristic of a strong community and, not surprisingly, its absence also surfaced frequently in students’ discussions of barriers to community. When students trusted each other, they felt they could take risks with their comments and questions in class. When that trust was missing, they felt less comfortable sharing ideas, particularly if they were not sure how others would construe their points. Several students worried that peers’ negative impressions of them would be hard to live down, given the intensity and extended duration of their contact with each other. As one explained,

If I don’t trust the rest of my peers or if I am not comfortable talking to them about personal issues we can’t learn the most possible. I think this is going to be especially true once we have our first placement session and we come back to the classroom to talk about it. Say I want to share a story about a lesson plan that didn’t work well in my classroom. I think it would be useful for me to get their input. But if the trust is not there, then I either won’t want to share things or I will be afraid to tell my classmates in fear of being laughed at or that it will leave the classroom in terms of me looking like a failure. I think that is the hardest part about being in Block I with a group of

students we have spent 2 years with and will have to spend the next 2 with as well.

Students also explored the issue of dissent as a potential barrier. As we had expected, given our data from previous semesters, most of them saw varying viewpoints as a threat to community rather than a potential strength:

- The students in the classroom should be one. They should try to get along with each other and negotiate their class as a whole.
- As a member of a community, the individual has a strong connection to his peers and therefore should not endanger the ties by dissenting against his fellow mates.
- No single member should have the right to reject or put down an idea of another single member.

George, one of the few men in this cohort, also wrote about consensus and dissent, but he put a different spin on it, addressing an issue that had emerged in previous semesters and that we had discussed in our research conferences. He talked about the way that a cohort can be swayed by strong personalities within it, often leading to conflict between the group as a whole and the instructor. As he saw it,

The hardest part of being a member of the First Professional Block community might be my opinionatedness. I stand by my personal beliefs and am usually not afraid to let people know when I am not happy in a given situation. I can see this as a problem because I can often convince others that my opinions are correct causing a resistance against those who possess more authority than I do.

Finally, a number of students wrote about barriers to community that were under the surface of our classes and often missed by us as teachers, particularly when their roots were in other classes than the ones we were teaching. Molly expressed concern about issues of respect and emotional safety: “I have noticed that some members of the class make faces and snicker behind others’ backs. I do not feel these actions are appropriate in a classroom community.” Another student, whose closest friends were abroad during the semester she took Block I, said,

I know most of the 29 other students but I do not feel like I connect with any of them. . . . I am trying to get to know people I do not know and try to foster some

connections with ones I do. The funny thing is, people I came into block as friends with are not bothering with me and I am afraid to approach them.

A significant influence on our decision to continue our research into a subsequent semester was our desire to devise research strategies that would allow us to tap these previously hidden issues in our classes. Without the focused free-writes, we probably would not have known what either of these students was experiencing in the context of Block I. We expected that there were other undercurrents within the cohort that our students had not revealed, either because they did not feel comfortable doing so or because our data-collection methods did not open up enough space for their concerns. We resolved to try different strategies in the subsequent semester in hopes of understanding these more clearly.

Semester 4

Of the four cohorts we studied, these 34 women were the most positive as a whole about their experiences as a community. In January, they identified three benefits they felt they would reap as a part of Block I: new and stronger friendships with peers; more support and help from others who were in, to quote one student, "the same boat"; and a richer and larger set of ideas and experiences. Their writing 3 months later reflected these same trends, with very few additions in terms of content. The following April update was typical of what we received:

My [positive] opinions have not changed. As a result of spending so much time together with the other students in Block I, I have made many more friends. I have had the opportunity to "bond" with fellow students about teaching, our classes, and the placements we are placed in. This experience is something I would not want to go through alone. I truly value the fact that there is so much group support and encouragement. I feel comfortable being a part of this Block.

One new benefit was articulated by this student, who talked about a new spirit of professionalism that was rooted in community discussion about field placements:

We all knew each other prior to Block I but the bonds we have made in the past months are different than before. Through working together and having similar experiences in the field we have developed a strong connection. I feel that our relationships have changed from that of friends and classmates to that of professionals. I didn't expect that at all. This has occurred especially with those classmates who are at the same school as me. I find that instead of talking about our plans for the weekend or homework assignments, we have begun to talk about issues we are having in our teaching.

There was more variation between the negative aspects students anticipated in January and those they reported actually experiencing. Students' concerns at the beginning of the semester included the effects of personal disputes, uneven contributions to group work, feelings of isolation from others outside the program, and competition. The most commonly cited concern was how negative personal relationships might interfere with the work of the block. In January, students worried that they would "get irritated seeing the same faces 3 hours daily," "get sick of each other," and experience "clashing of personalities." These concerns all but disappeared in their April reflections, however. One student who worried about personal disputes was relieved to see little evidence of that: "Luckily, I didn't see any major disputes that hindered our learning process. I am EXTREMELY happy with the group of girls in Block I and don't think that it could get any more friendly." Another talked about being "surprised by how well we all get along. I am extremely lucky to be in this block and I am glad that I can be with the same people for Block II." Although one person acknowledged the existence of cliques, there was little other evidence that students perceived personal static within the block as detrimental to their learning or the functioning of the community.

The second most common concern in January was around group work, with five students specifically discussing potential frustration if others in their groups did not shoulder their share of the task. Sheila's comments were typical: "I'm always nervous about working in groups (especially on papers/projects) because I find that I always work extra hard so not to let the group down and often others don't do their

share." After several months of working on groups, three members still expressed this concern, but Sheila's fears had not come to fruition: "I think I will always be wary of group projects but my experience was not negative with them this semester. This may be due to the fact that everyone in Block I worked hard and wanted to do well." Her position was echoed by Marlene, who also mentioned group work concerns in her January writing:

The negative aspect that I wrote about, how one person might not contribute, really did not happen. There were a couple of times when a person might not have finished their reading, so that made it harder to talk in discussion groups, but I don't think that there was a time when a person really didn't participate.

Robin, the one student who worried in January that quieter students would be silenced in the large group, actually retracted those concerns in April:

I was afraid quieter students would get lost in the crowd, but each teacher made sure that that would not happen. I loved how you taught us to be aware of giving others opportunities, especially in small groups, and I saw those tactics in action. If someone wasn't saying much other people in the groups would always ask if they had anything to say or add.

Not everyone shared Robin's perspective, however.

Sometimes I want to participate [Deanna wrote], but there are so many other people who also want to participate that once the teacher has finally gotten to me another person has said my idea. I am very nervous in large groups, and sometimes I need time to plan out what I am going to say in my head. But this time that I need is never available, only because everyone jumps at the chance to talk.

This issue of "air time" in a large group was a significant ongoing concern for us as faculty members, but no one save these two students mentioned it in either set of data.

As it had in the previous semester, dissent and its converse, consensus, were discussed by a small number of respondents. In the January data, four students wrote about the potential for community conflict that different opinions on issues might raise. Two of these students were careful to explain, in parentheses, that although

they were putting their responses in the negative category, such differences of opinion would not, as one of them put it, "necessarily be a bad thing." In April, no one tackled this question at all, except for one student who wrote that there were no disagreements about issues in the block "because everyone basically believes the same thing about inclusion." Although we did not necessarily think this was the case, the student's perception was not surprising to us, given the trends in data we already had.

Finally, whereas competition within the group had been mentioned by only one student in January, three students wrote about it in April. According to one, "I see a little competitiveness between each other in terms of what each of us got on our papers, etc. but I know that this happens all the time, so it is not really a big deal." Another concurred: "Almost always students compare their grades, but I feel this is a normal and unavoidable part of school."

We were surprised by the positive nature of nearly all of the data from this cohort. Although some negative issues that previous cohorts raised were mentioned, they tended to be cited by a small number of students and in a much less emphatic way. As faculty, we found these trends to be encouraging; as researchers, we wondered if there was more to the story. Were there issues and concerns that students did not feel able to share? Would we hear about them later? Would these stories become part of the lore passed from cohort to cohort but inaccessible to us?

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As the above data indicate, the four cohorts differed widely in their perceptions of community within Block I. Whereas the students in Semester 4 reported a tremendous sense of trust and support within the cohort, the students in Semester 2 reported hostility, factions, and disappointment. Experiences in Semesters 1 and 3 were more mixed. Given that there were no substantive changes in the syllabi, assignments, or pedagogy across those four semesters, this degree of variation was surprising to us.

We wonder about the influence of various factors on specific cohorts. For example, gender

and racial imbalances seem to make a difference in the class. Although male students are always a tiny minority, they often absorb a disproportionate amount of talk time during discussions, and they change the group dynamic. We have observed that the presence of four men in Semester 1 created a different dynamic than in Semester 4, when there were none. In addition, issues of race and ethnicity moved into the foreground in our program because it is designed to prepare students to teach in diverse classrooms. Most courses require students to engage with content about diversity in schools and social injustice, and all students are required to have urban placements where they often work with children very different from those with whom they grew up. Consequently, conversations about race and ethnicity arise frequently within our classes. Although the number of students of color in each cohort is fairly consistent (two to four), these students' histories and experiences with people of different backgrounds vary, as do the histories and experiences of the White students. Because of this, the comfort level around such discussions also varies. In some semesters, we have been able to address issues of racism and prejudice with a high level of student engagement and participation, whereas in other semesters, such activities have created dissension and tension within the group.

Students with strong personalities also appear to have the power to alter classroom dynamics and our impressions of the cohort as a whole. Our feelings about one student we perceive as antagonistic can color how we react toward the entire cohort. Those dominant students also appear to affect other students' willingness to share particular viewpoints in class.

These emerging conclusions have a variety of implications for our practice and our research. Although Block I faculty have always stressed the importance of becoming a strong learning community at the beginning of and periodically throughout the semester, we have made some changes in our approaches with students. In response to the concerns described above, we have implemented activities and assignments designed specifically to promote critical reflection on practice. We have also seized "teachable

moments" relative to critical reflection and community to emphasize our commitments to students. Mara, for example, has been very intentional about praising students for engaging in critical evaluation after community building and encouraging students to process what they are told by classmates relative to the success or complexities of the activity they have tried. Within this context, she has stressed the importance of maintaining an open, nondefensive stance in the face of classmates' comments and critical feedback as well as the importance of providing that feedback in ways that can most easily be heard and responded to. Kelly has added a dialogue-journal assignment to her syllabus and explicitly taught students how to provide their partners with feedback and response that is both supportive and critical. We will continue to look for opportunities to teach and evaluate specific behaviors that we see as central to students' development as a community of critique, despite structural and time constraints within the program. We also intend to stress that members of a community do not always agree, that conflicts occur even (perhaps especially) in strong communities, and that collegial relationships are not always the same as friendships.

Students do not always share our values about community, however. Nor do they always see the value of processing conflicts and critical incidents. Despite our enthusiasm for the opportunities for growth and reflection that such occasions offer, students often see them as painful, undesirable, and the mark of an unsuccessful classroom community. Because they bring a wide range of personal histories, predispositions, and feelings to the cohort, they "read" the common text of tension-filled moments in different ways—ways we cannot fully predict or control.

As teachers in the context of a larger teacher-education program, we are also concerned about our responsibilities to other faculty members who will work with our cohorts in subsequent semesters. On one hand, we desire to provide all students with a fresh start, regardless of negative experiences they might have had with us and with the cohort. On the other, we are

aware that information from us might help our colleagues to meet students' needs better as well as to provide a valuable trail of data should future problems occur. This is an ethical dilemma that we have not yet resolved.

Implications for Teacher Education

Our research confirms the findings by Radencich et al. (1998) and Kelly and Dietrich (1995) that the team cultures that develop in cohorts can be powerfully positive or disturbingly negative. Rather than seeing this unevenness in cohort nature and function as a reason to abandon cohorts, we would argue that this variability demands further investigation of the factors that affect these various outcomes. The climate of cooperation and trust that Burnaford and Hobson (1995) saw as essential to successful cohort function cannot simply be assumed because a group stays together for a period of time. Teacher educators must take active steps to continually monitor, assess, and address the quality of interactions within the cohort.

We also found, as did Clyde and Condon (1996), that the opportunity to cross-check our observations and conclusions with another researcher was invaluable to our collaboration. Not only did our collaboration challenge the typical isolation of teaching, but it enabled us to grow as teachers and researchers. Using four eyes, four ears, and two brains to understand the same group of students enriched our analysis and broadened our individual lenses as well. Collaborating with another faculty member also helped balance the tensions of being an insider-outsider to our own research, the asset and liability of practitioners' research elaborated by Fecho (2000). Although we were clearly insiders in our own classrooms, we were semi-outsiders to one another's—same students, different content, different format.

Based on our findings, we offer the following suggestions for successful cohort development and maintenance:

1. Faculty should discuss with student cohorts the rationale, hoped-for benefits, and possible land mines for the use of the cohort model.
2. The ways in which cohorts function should be an explicit part of the curriculum of any teacher educa-

tion program. That is, forming community, dealing with differences, and negotiating conflicts within the cohort and in the K-12 classroom should all be explicitly studied as part of preparation for being a teacher.

3. Teacher educators must implement mechanisms for monitoring and assessing the changes within the student cohort. Faculty can use quick writes, journaling, class discussions, and classroom meeting formats to make transparent the functioning of the community as well as to model how these strategies can be used in K-12 classrooms.
4. Faculty members who share a group of students must find ways to exchange information essential to continuity and smooth functioning of the cohort. The professor who meets with the cohort on Tuesday must know what happened in class on Monday, not only the content that was addressed but also if there were any significant events in the "life of the community." High points (a unique community building moment or bonding experience) as well as challenges must be shared, as they will inform what happens next for the learners involved.

Implications for K-12 Practice

There are strong parallels between teacher education cohorts and the classroom communities in elementary and secondary schools. When a group of students remains together for extended periods of time and shares common experiences, the group often develops an identity and a history of its own. The positive aspects of this shared construction of community can include common stories ("Remember the time that Michael . . .") and shared triumphs (the successful school play). Some of the challenges we have articulated in teacher education cohorts also exist in K-12 classrooms. Practicing teachers in our graduate classes relate critical incidents from their own classrooms that have much in common with the narrative we used to open this piece.

Many of the issues that are difficult to discuss in teacher education classes are equally challenging in elementary and secondary classrooms. When issues of race, religion, families, sexual orientation, and other differences arise, teachers often feel inadequately prepared to respond constructively to such tricky terrain. Individual student comments become the occasion for classroom conflict, and students can become marginalized and excluded in third grade just as they are in college classrooms.

Teachers need to realize that their position can limit their knowledge of the classroom's peer culture. Interactions take place between and among students that affect the classroom community but remain outside the teacher's radar screen. Our research suggests that classroom teachers need strategies that will allow them to gather information about the classroom dynamics. Only when teachers have sufficient data about the relationships and events of the classroom can they decide whether to intervene and what to do.

Many of the same approaches we used in our research to gather data about our classroom communities can be used in K-12 settings to guide teachers' practice. Asking students to write (sometimes anonymously) about classroom events and dynamics on a regular basis can help teachers see the diversity of perspectives and move beyond a generic understanding of how things were going. Instead of assuming that class went well for everyone or that all the small groups have functioned cooperatively, teachers can actively solicit more detailed feedback. Frequent whole-class debriefing sessions may provide another source of information about classroom events. Such discussions not only provide information but also model for students the legitimacy of openly tackling hard issues and conflicts.

As classrooms and schools become more collaborative and involve multiple professionals who work with the same group of students, it becomes imperative that K-12 teachers, like university teachers, develop mechanisms for sharing information. When students return from physical education upset about something that happened during a game, the regular classroom teacher needs access to that information because the residue of the incident will affect the rest of the day.

Implications for Research

Our data also raise methodological issues, in particular questions about how best to conduct research on cohorts while simultaneously teaching them. Obtaining access to information about cohort dynamics is difficult because it some-

times puts students in the position of having to "tattle" on each other. The timing of our probes makes a difference as well. If we ask students to talk about the community after a critical incident, when feelings are high, they provide different information than they do during less volatile moments. In addition, we receive different data if we collect it during stressful times of the semester—for example, when students are working on multiple projects. Although the data from Semester 4 are very positive, they were collected before students' second field assignments were due, a period that consistently creates tension and competition among the cohort. Last but perhaps most significant, we are researching a phenomenon that changes constantly, often because of our own decisions as teachers. In a sense, we are shifting the very ground we are trying to describe.

Our future research will need to address these concerns. Although the methodological issues make this a challenging task, we are committed to exploring ways to combine teaching and researching this topic. We believe that students' ability to participate as thoughtful and critical members of cohorts increases their likelihood of creating such learning communities within their own future classrooms. As our data demonstrate, such a goal, although worthy, requires attention to many variables and acknowledgment of the messiness and complexity of the teaching-learning process.

NOTE

1. All student names have been changed.

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Mara Sapon-Shevin is a professor of education at Syracuse University. Her areas of interest include teaching for social justice, teacher education, and cooperative learning. Her most recent book is Because We Can Change the World: A Practical Guide to Building Cooperative, Inclusive Classroom Communities (Allyn and Bacon). She works actively with districts and schools on inclusion issues and antiracism curricula.

Kelly Chandler-Olcott is an assistant professor of reading and language arts at Syracuse University. Her research interests include classroom-based inquiry by teachers and adolescents' use of electronic technologies in their literacy practices.