

Beating the Odds: Communities of Practice Supporting a Student Teacher with Special Needs

Gary P. Moser^{1,2}, Ann C. Sharp², Mi Ok Kang²,
& Aaron O'Brien³

¹Alpine School District, American Fork, UT, ²Utah Valley University,
³Self-Employed

Abstract: *This is a case study about the experiences of a student teacher with anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) in a traditional teacher education program. This study tracks the student teacher's progress from his initial unsuccessful placements in fieldwork and student teaching through marked improvement after reassignment to a school with a highly supportive and inclusive environment. Using theories established in communities of practice literature and relying on ethnographic observations and interviews for our data collection and analysis, we provide an in-depth portrayal of the efforts of the communities of practice, carefully highlighting the roles of the participating teacher education communities of practice that had led him toward his academic and professional success. We conclude that student teaching is a social act which occurs within various communities of practice. When these communities worked together to build an inclusive academic and professional environment, a student teacher with special needs made significant improvement in teaching and became a full member of the communities of professional and academic practice.*

Keywords: *Teacher education, inclusive education, student teachers with special needs, communities of practice*

Building a learning community that is inclusive of a full range of diversity and differences is believed to induce a more equitable and cohesive education (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008). To this end, many teacher education communities have learned more about how to recruit, train, and retain prospective teachers from diverse ethnic/cultural backgrounds (Sleeter, 2008). Some researchers studied approaches to enhancing inclusivity for prospective teachers with special needs, including a few case studies on prospective teachers with dyslexia (Morgan & Rooney, 1997; Riddick, 2003; University of Southampton, n.d.), learning disability (Gilbert, 1998), and emotional disabilities (McGee & Kauffman, 1989).

However, equitable education for prospective teachers with special needs in teacher education has been mostly neglected. In spite of protections granted under federal laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for all Handicapped Act Amended 1990, and the Americans with Disabilities Act established in 1990, equitable education for prospective teachers with special needs continues to be treated as a private interest rather than a public good.

Many in the field doubt the teachability of prospective teachers with special needs, citing their physical, psychological, and/or social disability. As a result, many prospective teachers with special needs are left without adequate support systems to “sink or swim” (Bargerhuff, Cole, & Teeters, 2009; Brulle, n.d.). We, as the student teacher’s cooperating teacher (first author) and teacher educators in the participating teacher education community (second and third authors), also observed that the participating teacher education community had paid limited attention to prospective teachers with special needs until we had a student teacher (fourth author) who struggled with challenges associated with anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder (ADD). We also found that his struggle was heightened during his transition from university student where he received accommodations to a professional sink-or-swim environment. Based on careful observation, we attribute the student teacher’s eventual success to his perseverance in the face of disabilities as well as the active involvement of the members of teacher education communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000).

By employing situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we examine the process through which this student teacher learned how to operate within professional communities of practice. Prior to involvement in these communities, the student teacher had been dismissed from an elementary classroom because his disabilities interfered with his teaching. When the student teacher was situated in a learning community of professional and academic teacher educators with excellent mentoring skills, he made significant progress.

First, we introduce the struggles that the student teacher experienced focusing on his transition from failing student teacher to college graduate. Next, we review the student teacher’s consciousness of his role as a classroom teacher and the practices that led to his transformation into a successful classroom teacher. We relied on theories established in communities of practice literature and relied on ethnographic observations and interviews for our data collection and analysis. We provide an in-depth portrayal of the efforts of the communities of practice, carefully highlighting the relentless efforts of the student teacher to succeed despite the challenges he faced in fieldwork as well as the roles of the participating teacher education communities of practice that led him toward his academic and professional success. Finally, we discuss implications for teacher educators, educational leaders, and many teacher education programs that should be inclusive of diverse prospective teachers including those with special needs.

Student Teaching as Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

Situated learning is a theory that frames learning as “a pervasive, embodied activity involving the acquisition, maintenance, and transformation of knowledge through processes of social interaction” (Contu & Willmott, 2003, p. 285) in communities of practice (CoPs). The communities of practice can be defined as groups of practitioners with a common passion or a concern who share resources including stories, experiences, useful tools, etc. with the goal of collectively improving their performance in the area of interest (Wenger, 2000). In teacher education communities of practice, student teachers are situated in a learning community where they acquire knowledge and experiences that validate theories and research-based practices. When student teachers enter professional education CoPs as novice practitioners, they share knowledge they have obtained in teacher education communities of practice, while seeking experiences of others, reusing assets in the CoPs, and requesting information to improve their teaching. At first, student teachers are situated in a peripheral space still somewhat outsiders of the professional CoP, but through active social engagement they move

towards the center of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They come to understand and adopt the practices of more experienced members, not by simply mimicking the existing members' practices but by becoming fluent in the socio-cultural practices of the community.

Nickols' (2003) six reflective questions on membership, shared repertoires, characters, purpose, lessons learned, and group interactions provide us with a useful tool to analyze a student teacher's CoP engagement in terms of the situated learning process (See Table 1). In the education CoPs for student teachers, (1) the *members* come together for a joint enterprise, build *relationships* based on mutual engagement, and keep a (2) *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, etc.). New members of a CoP in teacher education obtain a new (3) *social identity* and find (4) *purpose/meaning* in their practices and historical and social contexts whether spoken or unspoken, represented or assumed. Therefore, in a CoP, (5) *lessons are learned* not as an individual endeavor but as a social process within which a group of people encounters (6) their formal/informal *group interactions* within the CoPs while sharing concerns, problems, and/or topics. Following the six characteristics enables us to carefully examine the internal workings of the communities of practice that supported the novice student teacher.

Table 1. *Community of practice (CoP) characteristics (Nickols, 2003)*

Characteristic	Explanation
1. Membership	All members work in a common or similar area.
2. Shared Repertoires	Common routines, methods, tools, and procedures learned through either training or incidentally while on the job.
3. Characters/Identities	Work-related relationships that describe the identity of the members: insiders/outsideers.
4. Purpose/Meaning	Common overarching mission or motivation that describes what the members are "up to."
5. Lessons Learned	New knowledge and experiences shared within the CoPs while completing missions/goals.
6. Group Interactions	Formal and informal aspects of the group being interfaced and merged.

Mentoring for a Student Teacher with Special Needs

Many educational researchers have used the CoP framework to analyze learning communities created by educational professionals and teachers (Bezyak et al., 2013; Carr & Chambers, 2006; Lockyer et al., 2002) and for professional development in teacher education and through situated learning (Au, 2002; Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Buysee, Sparkman, and Wesley (2003) examined four educational programs and found that prospective teachers in those programs obtained shared goals and benefits by joining multiple CoPs. Putnam and Borko (2000) specifically highlighted the importance of the

mentoring provided in a learning community within which prospective teachers are actively interacting with more experienced and knowledgeable teachers and teacher educators.

Aligned with these articles, this study focuses on a nontraditional mentoring process developed by university and professional members of CoPs to support a student teacher with special needs. Many articles have examined successful mentoring strategies, specifically focusing on the role of the cooperating teachers, the relationships they built with prospective teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Glenn, 2006; Russell & Russell, 2011), and the importance of emotional support (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Day & Leicht, 2001; Ria et al., 2003). These studies provided teacher educators and mentoring teachers with useful tools for successfully nurturing prospective teachers, yet researchers have barely begun to analyze the dynamic mentoring process that occurs within educational communities.

After briefly analyzing the participants' relationships to the student teacher through the lens of the six characteristics that define a CoP, this study takes up two research questions: (a) which aspects of the CoP contributed to meaningful changes in the student teacher's performance?, and (b) in what ways did the student teacher's participation in the CoPs influence his actual practice? To answer these questions, we track the student teacher's progress, beginning with his reassignment after dismissal from a student teaching placement and ending with his successful graduation from a teacher education program with state licensure. We examine the aspects of the typically-functioning professional CoP that contributed to the student teacher's initial failure as well as the inclusion strategies of the second, stronger CoP. In the conclusion, we suggest distinctive strategies and implications for teacher educators who serve diverse prospective teachers, specifically those with special needs.

Data Sources and Analytical Methods

This study makes an effort to describe the social interactions among the members of the teacher education communities related to the student teacher's successful completion of fieldwork upon graduation. Using qualitative methods, retrospective in nature, the study looks back at the phenomenon and examines the factors in relation to six elements of a Community of Practice (Nickols, 2003). Throughout the student teaching period, the cooperating teacher kept a reflective journal of daily events; using this record, the authors adopted an emic, insider's perspective, looking at the data from a "native" point of view.

More simply, this case study examines how a group of people came together to support a struggling student teacher and built relationships through shared repertoires such as classroom routines and formal evaluations. Accommodations and interventions made by the CoP will be analyzed to determine how knowledge and experiences were organized to support the student teacher and how this influence affected the student teacher's actual practice.

We rely on three sources of data: interviews with the student teacher and the academic and professional staff, ethnographic observation data collected by the cooperating teacher, and personal student documents collected by the school of education to track individual student's academic achievement. These sources helped us to analyze the socially-situated learning the student teacher experienced in the teacher education communities of practice and to discuss the implications of this case study for the wider teacher education community.

Context and participants

The subject of this study was a male student admitted into an elementary education program located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The student teacher was cognitively capable of succeeding as a teacher: his cumulative GPA was 3.64 and he received an *ETS Recognition of Excellence*, an honor given to those who place in the top 15% of all test takers

on the Praxis Series for Content Knowledge. He was receiving accommodations from the University's Accessibility Services Department for challenges such as anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder (ADD). As the student teacher proceeded in the elementary education program, signs of his struggles were not apparent. When he was interviewed in a group setting during the School of Education admission process, he seemed to blend in well with the other candidates. The student's undetected problems continued throughout the program where multiple partner and group work settings allowed for completion of high quality work despite his limited ability to contribute. Offering a possible explanation for how struggles throughout his junior year went undetected, the elementary field coordinator suggested that the stress to perform is greatly reduced because of the prevalence of partner work, giving others the opportunity to take the lead roles.

Signs of difficulty first emerged during the student teacher's three-week senior field experience when he began teaching for the first time without a partner. His senior year's cooperating teacher and the university supervisor expressed concern that he lacked the necessary skill sets to teach in the classroom. They observed frequent absences, a fear to teach on his own, and a general lack of professionalism. They reluctantly agreed to work with him the following semester during the student teaching assignment. Their concerns deepened as content inaccuracies and a lack of "withitness," sometimes referred to as having eyes in back of your head, were observed. He was not aware of classroom management issues, had trouble recognizing when his students needed his attention, and struggled with making connections between pedagogy and student needs.

As their apprehensions heightened, anxiety within the student teacher did also. He reported anxiety, depression, and inability to communicate with his cooperating teacher. From his perspective, the cooperating teacher was overly critical and failed to provide encouragement. Feeling very overwhelmed, he observed no empathy from the cooperating teacher. When the student teacher told his cooperating teacher that he felt like he was being scrutinized as though he was under a microscope, the cooperating teacher responded bluntly, "You *are* under a microscope. Deal with it and get on with it."

In order to "deal with it", the student teacher requested accommodations unaccustomed to the teaching profession such as time during the school day for a nap, a need for time away from the children after teaching a lesson, and isolation from others during the lunch period so he could regroup. Faced with such unusual requests and coupled with low marks on the student teacher's first observation from the university supervisor, the cooperating teacher and the school principal felt they had no choice but to ask the student teacher to leave.

The administrators of the education program at the university discussed the dilemma this student teacher now faced and determined that they should not give up on him. A search was made for a cooperating teacher who had the mentoring skills to help him. When a recommendation was given, the principal of the school was contacted for permission to accept this student teacher. After the principal discussed the situation with the proposed cooperating teacher, the student teacher was given a second chance with only six weeks remaining of the eleven-week student teaching period.

Once the student teacher was accepted into the new school, the CoP of that school put into place a strong mentoring system. A communication network was set up between the principal, the cooperating teacher, and the university field supervisor. The members of this network maintained closer, more frequent communication than is typical. The university field supervisor not only communicated with the student teacher on a more frequent basis, but also added four observations to the student teacher's schedule, allowing time to give him ample

feedback and evaluate his performances. Expectations were clearly delineated and short term goals were initiated by the principal and the university field supervisor.

The cooperating teacher chose to remain in his classroom for what was left of the student teaching experience, providing scaffolded experiences to support the student teacher's training¹. He gave him model lesson plans, team-taught small groups in literacy and math, provided additional time for lesson preparation, provided classroom management tips and time for practice, and introduced him to other teachers for additional networking. The field supervisor provided tips for classroom management, advice on professionalism, and guidelines for instructional techniques. In addition to requesting additional help from his colleagues, the cooperating teacher prepared his fourth grade students to interact with this student teacher in a positive manner. Telling them that the student teacher needed their help to succeed, the fourth graders accepted the challenge, and became empathetic to his plight. They embraced the situation with a desire to help. Where some students will typically challenge student teachers, this group of students was distinctively supportive (See Table 2 for the support provided in the second school).

Data Collection and Procedures

Personal student file documents. Student documents found in the personal university files of the student teacher such as student teacher evaluation forms from the first and second schools, faculty ratings of professional disposition, and Praxis exam certificates were examined to corroborate and augment multiple facets of the case. These documents, gathered over time, represented authentic records of the student teacher's performance, created through ongoing activities unrelated to the current study (Corbetta, 2003).

Interviews. Interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and coded for the six key elements of CoP as described by Nickols (2003) (Refer to Table 1.). The fifteen to thirty minute interviews followed a semi-structured pattern in which questions were asked in no specific order, questions were added or removed from the flow of the interview as needed, and follow-up questions were asked to probe for qualifying information (Saunders & Thornhill, 2003). Participants were interviewed individually within the university or public school where the interviewee interacted with the student teacher. Participants were allowed to review the open-ended interview questions in advance of the interview.

Direct observation. Direct observation is a technique in which the observer watches and listens to events directly (Patton, 2002). Because the cooperating teacher (the first author of the study) made observations as a participant observer, his role in this study was conceived after the instance had concluded. Because the cooperating teacher documented the instance through daily journaling as part of an ongoing reflection, habitual to his practice before the study was proposed, his observations are an authentic record not predetermined by the research. Thomas (2003) suggested that direct observation has the advantage of gathering information from natural or unplanned events. Being a participant as well, the observer was free to explore feelings and

¹ Normally, cooperating teachers will leave the classroom for the last six weeks of an eleven-week period, only monitoring the classroom occasionally. They typically acclimate the student teacher to their classroom with one to two weeks of orientation, allowing minimal duties like teaching one or two content areas at a time and working with small groups or individual students. Once the student teacher is comfortable with the routines, the cooperating teacher hands over the responsibilities of learning to them.

Table 2. *Comparison of Student Teaching Experiences.*

First 5-weeks of student teaching experience at School 1	Final 6-weeks of student teaching experience at School 2
<p>Positives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy and support from university supervisor • Cooperative students in the classroom • Communication to support the student teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Expressed what needed to be improved ○ Allowed to assist during small group reading and math instruction 	<p>Positives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong expectations set and adhered to by university supervisor and principal • Positive community built with students in the classroom • Willingness to invest time and energy to support the student teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gradual, deliberate opportunities transitioning from small-group to whole-class instruction ○ Coaching in lesson planning • Student teacher gained confidence through sustained support
<p>Negatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor communication between cooperating teacher and student teacher • General lack of support in preparing lessons • Minimal opportunities to instruct; mostly grading • Student teacher lost confidence 	<p>Negatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student teacher felt defeated at the beginning. • The cooperating teacher spent an inordinate amount of time and effort to scaffold student teacher's experience.

perspectives (Patton, 2002). However, we also admit that the direct observation method also has some limitations, including reactivity and bias rooted in the beliefs and expectations of the participant observer.

Data analysis and audit trail. In order to overcome reactivity and bias as well as maintain the integrity of the study we used triangulation, kept an audit trail, participated in reflectivity, and did a member check to bring rigor to the process. Triangulation came from analysis of the student teacher's personal files, interviews, and participant observation. An audit trail documented all aspects of the inquiry process providing transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A physical audit trail documented the research methodology decisions and an intellectual audit trail outlined how our thinking evolved throughout the phases of the study. Objectivity is impossible when a key participant is also the researcher, but using extensive dialogue with the research group, the participant observer was better able to sensitize himself to those perspectives that might cause reactivity and bias (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

As the first author, the participant observer engaged in the analysis process and discussed his perspectives at length with the other authors. The other authors brought questions and insights to the analysis sessions that forced the first author to consider ways his experiences could both support the process or be potentially biased. This reflexive process was

essential to the study because it acknowledged how the first author's participation both helped and hindered the interpretation of the data (Reich, 2003).

A member check was conducted once we had written the first draft. This approach permits the participants to determine if the findings match their perception of the events (Neuman, 1997). All participants reviewed what the authors had written. Each agreed that their points of view and the events discussed had been accurately described. All data were saved and interviews were coded using a comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1999) until the authors confirmed consistency in the codings with an interrater reliability of 91%.

Decisions were informed by the six elements (Nickoles, 2003) of a CoP which facilitated further the setting aside of preconceptions and assumptions. In the process of compiling examples of the six characteristics, statements from the cooperating teacher's daily journal were paired with interview statements. Quotes exemplifying a CoP characteristic were highlighted. Once the interviews were coded, statements were grouped according to which of the six characteristics the statement represented. Groups of statements were then combed for emerging themes.

Factors that Situated the Student Teacher's Learning with the Defined CoPs Snapshot

First, we identified the six characteristics of a CoP in the student teacher's CoPs, and then developed a diagram to define the relationships between members of the CoP and the student teacher (See Figure 1). Inclusive *membership* exists amongst all educators who are involved in educating children within the public school boundaries either directly as in the case of those working in the public schools or indirectly as those working with prospective teachers at the university level. As part of the perpetuation of the profession, the members of CoPs are part of the process of inviting the student teacher into the community through the student teacher training process (*inside/outside identities*). The members of the university CoP (the department chair and university supervisor) *shared* their *repertoires* (methods, tools and routines) for supporting the student teacher (*purpose/meaning*) with the members of professional CoP (the principal, collaborative team, the cooperating teacher, etc.) and, in this sharing process, the university supervisor bridged two CoPs by integrating the formal/informal interactions and mediating conflicts of different group members (*group interaction*). More importantly, during their frequent interactions with the student teacher, all members of the CoPs shared the *lessons* they had *learned*, which were concurrent with the student teacher's time in the CoP. In Figure 1, we outline the unique role of the 4th grade students in this student teaching experience. We decided to include the 4th grade students as members of the community because they were expected to take an active role in their learning by engaging in the instructional strategies presented to them by their teacher and the student teacher. By taking over the teaching responsibilities of a cooperating teacher's classroom, the student teacher was expected to hone his skills in instructional procedures and content.

Shared Repertoire and Lessons Learned

During the data analysis, we specifically observed the ways in which the members of the CoPs shared their repertoires (methods, tools, and routines) among the members to support the student teacher and identified four factors that situated the student teacher's learning as a social process within the defined CoPs: an open invitation, transparency, shared knowledge/experiences, and mentoring strategies.

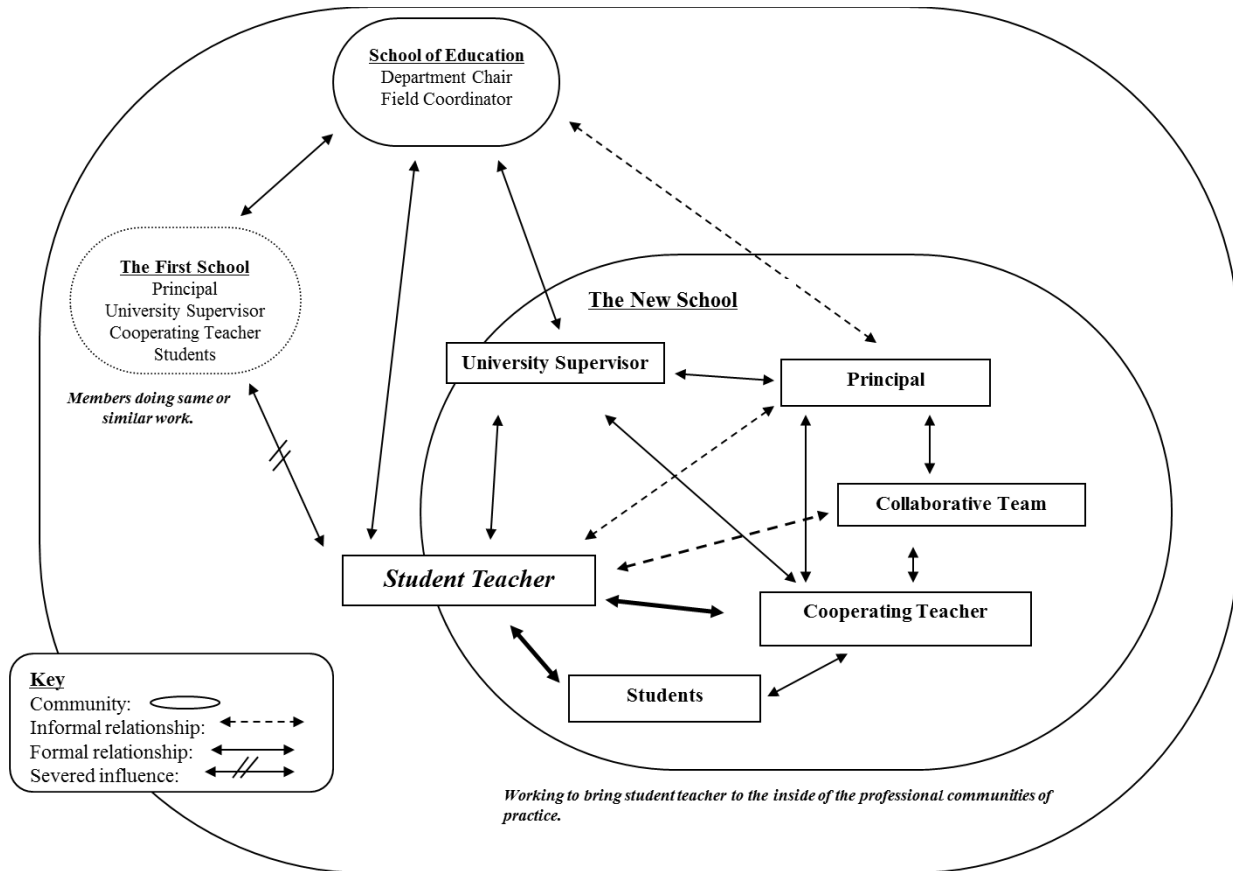


Figure 1. Community of practice (CoP) relationships

Open invitation. Instead of dropping the failing student teacher from the teacher education program, an agreement to rally around the student teacher's unrealized potential was made at several levels of the community. The university administrators and field coordinator made the decision to locate a new school, a new university supervisor, and a new cooperating teacher. Accepting the challenge, the principal of the new school provided one of his strongest teachers as a mentor. Importantly, the student teacher agreed to try again. He determined that he would complete the student teaching experience to fulfill the requirements for the bachelor's degree in education, but had no desire to seek licensure. At this point, any teacher self-efficacy was non-existent; all he wanted to do was graduate. Even though this decision reduced the concerns of the members of the CoPs about him being an independent classroom teacher, they hoped the new placement would benefit the student teacher and allow him the opportunity to continue learning. The second school was deliberately chosen for its reputation in exceptional mentoring.

Once the invitation was extended, consistent, open, ongoing dialogue was put in place. The interviews with all five of the participants provided evidence of regular communication between members of the CoPs. From the beginning, a feedback loop was insisted upon by the university supervisor where weekly reflections from both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher were emailed to him. These weekly reflections were shared with the principal and the university field coordinator. At first, the cooperating teacher's reflections were full of concern and stratagem, but as his reflections became more and more positive, he started

including the student teacher on the emails, hoping his reflections would reduce the student teacher's anxiety and depression and optimize his potential to be a successful teacher.

The CoPs engaged in frequent discussions with one another. The principal regularly communicated with the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher. He also invited the student teacher into his office often to highlight his accomplishments in the classroom as well as to discuss concerns with him. The cooperating teacher and the university supervisor communicated in private with the student teacher to address the skill sets being covered. The student teacher was able to openly share his concerns and, though reluctant at first, accepted the challenges and expectations of the CoPs; each individually agreeing to a second chance experience while collectively committing themselves to an ongoing open dialogue.

Transparency within the CoPs. Each participant of the CoP managed to achieve transparency as they were consciously forthright with one another. Transparency is a professional expectation, but it does not always happen. The university elementary field coordinator was frank and honest as he approached the school principal. As he extended the invitation for the school to participate in the student teaching process, he revealed that the prospective teacher faced unique challenges and made it clear that the school could withdraw from the arrangement if need be. He assured the principal, "If your kids are suffering because of the student teaching placement, then we will move [him] on." The principal explained the student teacher's situation to the cooperating teacher, "This student teacher has had a failed experience. Would you be willing to work with him?" and extended his full support to both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher.

The principal and the cooperating teacher, feeling they were starting at ground zero with this student teacher, engaged in transparency through explicit and clear expectations, especially for professional attire, preparedness for class, and responsibilities and duties. Transparency from members of the CoP sparked transparency within the student teacher. When the student teacher inquired about taking a power nap during specialty time, the cooperating teacher made it clear that "naps are not possible in this profession." Even though the student teacher's request was denied, the student teacher sensed the cooperating teacher wanted to support him, so he revealed that he was depressed and wasn't getting much sleep at night, reporting an average of 4 hours. He also shared that he was overwhelmed and experiencing anxiety. This was the first time since he started student teaching that he was able to share his struggles with his cooperating teacher. By being plainspoken about his needs and concerns, the student teacher received understanding and appropriate support while avoiding misunderstanding and further frustration.

Knowledge and experiences shared for meaningful change. We observed that members of the CoP maximized their support for the student teacher by sharing knowledge and experiences with one another. The principal recognized that the student teacher "was not someone who would just step in and teach [a] class, but someone who needed to be brought along," selecting a cooperating teacher he knew had the ability to do just that. The university supervisor supported the cooperating teacher by sharing some of the mentoring responsibilities and encouraging the student teacher to teach using multiple strategies. The university supervisor and the cooperating teacher shared examples of how to plan and prepare age-appropriate lessons, provided multiple classroom management strategies, and insisted on professional attire. The university supervisor conducted formative evaluations and one summative evaluation, and visited the classroom on several additional occasions throughout the 6-week period to observe progress. The 4th grade students in the classroom were very cooperative. According to the student teacher, they wanted to please their teacher and this made them

willing to support him as their student teacher. Thanks to their positive attitudes and behaviors, the student teacher was able to form a strong relationship with them, giving them as much praise as possible for any minor accomplishment, and trying to prepare very engaging lessons.

Mentoring strategies. When the student teacher's formal observation by the university supervisor was scheduled one week after his reassignment to the new school, the cooperating teacher noted a visible increase in the student teacher's anxiety, "He looked ready to collapse." For the cooperating teacher, this incident became an impetus for greater resolve. Devising a four-prong strategic plan, he committed himself to providing substantial scaffolding for the student teacher.

First, the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) was used to help the student teacher prepare effective lesson plans for the days he would be observed and evaluated by the university supervisor. Through this approach, the cooperating teacher shouldered much of the instructional burden for the first critical observed lesson evaluation. He provided a sample lesson plan, lesson materials, clear guidelines for each section of the lesson, and time for the student teacher to practice. The student teacher progressed until he was planning and preparing his own lessons and materials. However, allowing time for extra practice became a standard procedure before each observed and evaluated lesson. Regarding this approach, the student teacher reported, "He did the gradual release model with me. [The first cooperating teacher] didn't help me at all. No instruction. [The second cooperating teacher] helped me prepare for the students. At first he modeled it to me, and then we did it, and then I did it."

Secondly, a team-teaching method was initiated so that the student teacher could mirror the cooperating teacher's instructional and management techniques. Dividing the class into small groups for reading, math, and science, the cooperating teacher invited the student teacher to team-teach with him by rotating the student groups each day. A smaller more manageable number of students seemed less intimidating to the student teacher, and the cooperating teacher was better able to monitor the effectiveness of the instruction given. Team-teaching in this manner enabled the children to progress in their education while at the same time giving the student teacher a viable way of developing his skills.

The student teacher reported that small group teaching allowed his "anxiety to heal." He reports, "He actually gave me some steps to do. You read to them, and then you asked them questions. . . I would call back a group and have them read quietly. I would ask them about comprehension questions and I would complement them and tell them they were doing well. Yeah, the difference between this teacher and my first cooperating teacher was night and day."

Third, time was dedicated to explaining, modeling, and providing practice for classroom management techniques such as having students clear off their desks before each lesson, practicing attention signals, addressing students by name, using various types of media in a lesson, giving students specific feedback, monitoring student learning, and soliciting active student involvement.

Finally, a reciprocal relationship between students and student teacher was encouraged. The students were encouraged to support the student teacher by giving their very best effort when the student teacher was teaching. The student teacher was encouraged to play with the students at morning recess and read aloud to the students after lunch recess. Through these efforts and the team-teaching done in small group rotations, the student teacher and the students were able to get to know each other in a relatively short period of time. During instruction, students voluntarily raised their hands, paid attention, and became fully involved

in their learning. The students had grown to care for him and were willing to help him succeed because of the rapport he had built with them.

With the four-prong strategy in place and a successful first observed evaluation, the attitudes of the entire CoP made a dramatic shift. Within one week's time, everyone, including the student teacher, began to see potential where before they had doubts. The university supervisor commented, "The e-mails from the cooperating teacher began celebrating small successes." The student teacher acknowledged: "When I did well on my first evaluation . . . I felt more confident in myself. . . I was really nervous, but I knew that there were a lot of people [cheering] for me."

Turning Points and Observable Changes in Performance

The student teacher's performance drastically changed within six weeks, and we attribute these changes to the interplay of certain characteristics of the CoPs such as open invitation, transparency, shared knowledge and experiences, and specific mentoring strategies. With these characteristics identified, two turning points emerged during the analysis process that triggered his rise in success. The first turning point happened when the cooperating teacher realized the level of the student teacher's anxiety. From that first realization, the cooperating teacher began looking for any success he could find. With greater commitment he adopted the role of a coach. The principal noted, "The cooperating teacher took it upon himself to understand and . . . ask what is the thing that will help [him] and how can [he] be a part of that help? [He] cared enough to make sure [the student teacher] found success."

The second turning point was like a chain reaction to the first. Influenced by the cooperating teacher's mentoring decisions, the student teacher experienced success for the first time during his student teaching experience. One week into his reassignment and after his first evaluation, the student teacher commented, "These are the best scores I have ever received." After this initial success, the cooperating teacher observed that the student teacher's effort to improve as a teacher increased: "I noticed that his ability to teach began to improve rapidly." The university elementary field coordinator stated, "At first [the student teacher] agreed to just graduate, but then he came back and said no, he wanted his teaching certificate . . . this was after he started working with the [second cooperating teacher]."

The compassionate approach of the cooperating teacher incited the attitude shift in the student teacher and together became a catalyst for the student teacher's further professional growth. As the student teacher continued to improve, his teacher evaluations showed more and more evidence of good teaching. By the final observation after only six weeks at the new school, the student teacher showed such remarkable improvement that the university supervisor, stunned, said to the cooperating teacher, "He's remembering everything we have taught him! He's applying it! I'd place my own child in his classroom!"

The effect of these turning points prompted an additional outpouring of positive support from everyone within the CoPs. The principal observed that the student teacher began to "realize that everyone wanted to help him become successful, and that was what our goal was in our school for our students, and that was our goal for our teachers, and that was what our goal was for our student teachers. He began to realize that no one is going to try to push him away; they're all going to try to help him do well."

With a clear record of academic success and cognitive capability coupled with his new found success, it was obvious that the student teacher's struggles originated from depression and anxiety. The cooperative, supportive, and inclusive professional environment he entered upon reassignment was crucial in helping him recover his self-esteem and self-confidence.

When the members of the CoPs became aware of the severity of the student teacher's challenges, they demonstrated an exceptional willingness to help this struggling student teacher graduate. As he began to manage his emotions, he overcame his disabilities to teach a class and performed effectively in the classroom.

Discussion

Commonly, if student teachers demonstrate a lack of professional skill sets, their placement in the education program is in jeopardy, as was the case for this student. Typical reasons for dismissal include behaviors that are seen as detrimental to the welfare of the students in the public schools. The first school gave grounds for dismissing this student teacher based on this standard. Normally, this student teacher would not be expected to graduate or achieve his licensure. However, the education program administrators at the university CoP level chose to give the student teacher an opportunity to try again. This was partly due to systemic issues that caused a communication breakdown between the first school and the student where clear expectations were not formed. For example, different faculty members customarily take the role of field supervisors throughout the program, and communication from one supervisor to another does not always happen. Workloads for faculty members are heavy, and opportunity to observe juniors during their practicum experience are never more than two hours a semester, making it challenging for the department to identify problems. Administrators, taking these systemic shortcomings into account, and now empowered with knowledge of the student teacher's specific needs, set forth the second time to remedy these issues.

In spite of the systemic limitations, administrators' willingness to help the struggling student teacher was unique. Even though the first cooperating teacher could have been better trained at knowing how to mentor this student, and clearer goals set, the anxiety and depression of the student teacher had spiraled down to such an extreme that his behavior was outside the expectations of the profession (i.e., delivering content inaccuracies), and highly unusual (i.e., requesting a nap after teaching). Yet, for this particular student teacher, there was strong empathy for continued support. That empathy being based on the inclusivity policy of the university, the student teacher's proximity to graduation, and his high academic record.

Brainstorming possible options for a second chance, the university administrators approached a principal who prioritized inclusivity. The principal was known for setting the tone for his school's culture with a dynamic mix of high exceptions and a belief in the power of a strong mentoring support system. As a result of their continuous efforts, remarkable changes were made in the student teacher's performance, which warrants further in-depth discussion.

Student Teaching as a Social Act

Our first research question examined factors that situated the student teacher's learning within the defined CoPs. To answer that question we illustrated the memberships of the university and professional CoPs in regards to their relationships and identified four factors that situated the student teacher's learning within the CoPs: open invitation, transparency, shared knowledge and experience, and mentoring strategies. Based on the findings, we found when the communities worked together to build an inclusive academic and professional environment, the student teacher with special needs overcame his barriers and maximized his teachability in the school. We argue that organizing the student teaching process as a social act situated in socially engaged and committed CoPs significantly improved the student teacher's likelihood of success.

In the defined CoPs, members' knowledge and experiences were organized to create a responsive environment for the student teacher until his successful completion of fieldwork and graduation from the university. The student teacher's positive experiences were not dependent on the efforts of any one teacher; instead, all members involved in the professional CoP (the university supervisor, the principal, the cooperating teacher, and the students) and the university CoP (the field coordinator and the dean) contributed to a committed effort of supporting the student teacher.

The four identified elements that situate the student teacher's learning within the CoPs also characterize student teaching as a social act as opposed to an individual endeavor. That is, the members agreed to make a hard decision to support the student teacher even though there was doubt about his potential. Also, shared information maintained transparency among the members of the CoPs. From the beginning, all members involved with the student teacher acknowledged his challenges and problems and were able to make informed decisions regarding their interaction with him. Then, members of the community offered resources and expertise as part of a shared repertoire. With a clearer understanding of the work routines expected of him and the tools at his disposal, the student teacher was equipped to succeed in the classroom. Finally, when the cooperating teacher adopted a four-pronged mentoring plan, it enabled the student teacher to experience positive outcomes rather than repeating failures.

Within the second professional CoP, the student teacher's particular challenges were reduced or eliminated as a result of dynamic social interactions. As Wendell (2006) explains, disability tends to be regarded as a personal or family issue rather than a matter of social responsibility, alienating disabled people from the abled and isolating individuals with special needs. However, in the professional CoP in which the student teacher was placed the second time, he was expected to fulfill his obligations as a fellow professional educator and the boundaries between the novice and the professionals blurred as time went on. Unlike the first school the student teacher was placed in, the second school seemed to treat the student's disability as a social responsibility rather than a personal issue. The school did not dismiss him as a failure and, instead, took responsibility as a group to fully integrate him into the professional CoP.

It is worth mentioning that the cooperating teacher and the university field supervisor later admitted that they first viewed the student teacher through a non-disabled lens (Biklen, 2000). At first, they allowed the mainstream view of educational practices to affect their assessment of the student teacher's potential. They had approached him with the same bias that allowed the student teacher's first school to dismiss him as a failure. After the student teacher demonstrated excellence in teaching using the four-pronged mentoring plan, the members of the university and professional CoPs realized that the student teacher thrived when provided more detailed, step-by-step guidance. In other words, the support he needed was not significantly different from the support granted other novice teachers; he simply needed a bit more.

Influences of the CoPs on the Student Teacher

Our second research question analyzed the influences of the CoPs on the student teacher's actual practice. The influences were evident in the drastic improvement of the student teacher's performance in the CoPs. Shifts in his attitude initiated a domino effect which led to accepting the challenges and responsibilities he was expected to meet as a member of the professional CoP. This in turn inspired positive feedback and newfound successes in teaching. The strategies

that the cooperating teacher applied in mentoring the student teacher improved his performance, allowing him to gain the appropriate skill sets to become successful.

The role of the 4th grade students is worth highlighting. As Valle, Solis, Volpitta, and Connor (2004) pointed out, revealing teachers' disabilities to their students has both risks (fear of negative perceptions and stigma associated with certain disabilities) and benefits (a means of connecting to students and a source of encouragement). This study demonstrated that the students in the participating classroom supported the student teacher with special needs very effectively. In fact, they played a crucial role in his success. Similar to the students in other studies (see Morgan & Rooney, 1997), the 4th grade students in the cooperating teacher's classroom were participatory, welcoming, and reciprocal when invited to take an active role in supporting the struggling student teacher. The students helped the student teacher by staying on task and refraining from disruptive behaviors, and in return, they learned what they needed to learn as well as experienced the joy of helping another succeed. In this way, participation in the learning community was mutually beneficial for the students and the student teacher.

One of the most evident changes the student teacher demonstrated was his pursuit of teaching licensure. Building from his experience of success in the second school, the student teacher decided to pursue not only completion of his degree, but also state licensure. Bearing in mind that teacher training is a process of "professionalization" through which a novice becomes an educational expert (Charlton, 2006), the importance of this shift should not be understated. In requesting that he be considered for licensure, the student teacher signaled his readiness to see himself as a professional educator rather than a struggling student.

Because people with disabilities are frequently characterized as dependent, powerless, incompetent, and degraded (Wendell, 2006), they tend to remain outcasts in the teaching workforce (Charlton, 2006), and, as a result, are often excluded from licensure. However, the CoPs were willing to support this student teacher's teaching licensure when he made substantial progress. Thanks to the empowerment he experienced in the CoPs, the student teacher became very competent as a stand-alone classroom teacher, which led him to achieve a teaching licensure at the end of six weeks of relatively, and remarkably, short training.

Implications of the Study

These findings raise a few implications for educating prospective teachers with special needs in traditional teacher education communities. First of all, we need to point out an assumption of the professional CoP in the second school that every abled student teacher also struggle, and that expecting all student teachers to be ready to take over a class is idealistic but not realistic. The cooperating teacher and the principal believed while abled student teachers are allowed to make mistakes within a range of expected or "normal" behaviors, disabled student teachers are subject to greater doubt and scrutiny because their performance deviates from the norm. Given that the participating student teacher experienced great success when he received more detailed guidance in a more sheltered classroom environment than usual, we would emphasize the importance of university and professional communities of practice systemically support student teachers with special needs with specific inclusion strategies and policies.

The teacher training program at the university did not really accommodate the needs of diverse learners. Accommodations were made at the course level, but was not extended to the student teaching experience. Changes that allow for inclusivity of diverse learners should be an integral part of the teacher training program. Recognition of and ways to better support students who struggle need to be set up from the beginning. Considerations and

accommodations for these student teachers should be incorporated into the entire teacher education program.

Second, it is particularly important that teacher education communities develop a mutual understanding of the possible accommodations for student teachers with special needs. The discrepancy between the student teacher's expectations of needing a break from the students and the realities of classroom teaching arose because the student teacher was positioned at the boundary of two CoPs: the academic university communities, where accommodations for students with special needs are mandated by federal regulation, and the professional school communities, where accommodations exist only for students. The student teacher was not conscious of the consequences of his identity transition from a college student to a teacher. To remain accountable for student teachers' performances, members of the teacher education CoPs, especially the university field coordinator and the school of education counselor, need to be explicit about what types of accommodation can be made in the professional field. This information would better prepare student teachers for the identity transition from student to professional classroom teacher.

In addition, we need to develop ways to increase the sustainability of intensively supportive CoPs. The participating student teacher demonstrated excellence in teaching when he was situated in a learning community in which many passionate, caring, and skilled professionals were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with him. As Bezyak, Ditchman, Burke, and Chan (2013) also demonstrated, the role of professionals in a CoP was crucial; in this case, the cooperating teacher made an extraordinary commitment to the student teacher's success and helped him become an active participant in the professional CoP. However, we recognize that not many professionals are willing to spend as much time and effort as the participating cooperating teacher did.

As Putnam and Borko (2000) described, there are many "mini discourse communities" of practice in which various members hold different perspectives on student teachers with special needs. Counter-narratives along with failure stories may pose a challenge to this CoP model. Like the first classroom to which the student teacher was designated, many professional communities of practice expect student teachers to be prepared to take over a classroom and smoothly transition into full members of their professional communities. The university field supervisor assigned to the student teacher at the first school shared a similar perspective with the first cooperating teacher. Once the first school refused to no longer support the student teacher, it became necessary for the university field coordinator to organize a new community of practice whose members held a different perspective toward working with student teachers with special needs.

To make CoPs sustainable, the university needs to build a long-term relationship with the school community (Buysee, Sparkman & Wesley 2003). In doing so, student teachers with special needs would be supported as they transition from novices learning at the periphery of the CoPs to professional educators at the center of the CoPs. The practices in this case study were part of an urgent remedy rather than a well-developed educational system. To increase the sustainability of such an inclusive and supportive community, the teacher education communities, both university and professional CoPs, need to build a shared vision and repertoire regarding how to judge a student teacher's ability to manage his/her emotions, overcome his/her disabilities to teach a class, and perform effectively in a social setting.

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