

Inside a Student Cohort: Teacher Education from a Social Capital Perspective

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In this article, we report on student teachers' perceptions of their cohort experiences. Using the lens of social capital theory, we analyzed their responses to an open-ended question on a survey and faculty members' responses in focus groups. The structural properties of cohorts — closure, stability, interdependence, and shared ideology — facilitated the development of social capital. Closure and stability promoted social and emotional support while interdependence and shared ideology prompted both positive and negative effects. The cohort model better served some students than others. We found that students were more likely to develop social capital by bonding with their cohort peers than by bridging with those outside their cohorts.

Key words: teacher candidates, student cohorts, social capital theory, bonding, bridging

Dans cet article, nous présentons les perceptions d'étudiants en pédagogie quant aux expériences de leur cohorte. À l'aide de la théorie du capital social, nous avons analysé leurs réponses à une question ouverte au sujet d'un sondage et des réponses de professeurs réunis en groupes de discussion. Les propriétés structurelles des cohortes — fermeture, stabilité, interdépendance et idéologie commune — ont facilité le développement d'un capital social. La fermeture et la stabilité ont favorisé le soutien social et émotif tandis que l'interdépendance et l'idéologie commune ont entraîné des effets à la fois positifs et négatifs. Certains étudiants plus que d'autres ont bénéficié du modèle de la cohorte. Nous avons découvert que les étudiants avaient plus chances de développer un capital social en tissant des liens avec les membres de leur cohorte qu'avec des personnes en dehors de leur cohorte.

Mots clés: futurs enseignants, cohortes d'étudiants, théorie du capital social, établissement de liens

It is late in the day at the end of the term. A student knocks at the door and asks to speak to her program coordinator about the decision to mix two student cohorts for the second year of their two-year program. Before long, this student reveals the results of a vote that the rest of her cohort has taken — it seems that a majority of them were strongly

opposed to having their cohort membership changed. She then seizes the opportunity to share a number of ideas she and her peers have about keeping the groups intact, but enabling them to mix occasionally. The program coordinator wonders if students in more traditionally organized programs would be as quick to mobilize to achieve group goals.

It is nearly noon, and as they pass by the program coordinator's office, a number of students are discussing a petition that has been distributed within their cohort. Inquiring about the petition, the coordinator discovers that it is related to one of her students who has been warned of possible debarment because he has been chronically absent from class. The coordinator learns that this student has garnered support among his cohort peers and has approved the distribution of the petition. The students in the hall speak about the pressures they feel to sign and how sorry they feel for their 'less mature' classmates who feel obliged to do what the group wants them to do. The coordinator wonders what role the cohort plays in preparing students to withstand similar pressures when they become teachers.

These two vignettes illustrate challenges that can occur when teacher-education programs adopt a cohort model to organize students. In recent years, cohorts have become more common in teacher education as teacher educators continue to search for the optimal conditions to prepare student teachers for the teaching profession. In this article, we examined student teachers' and instructors' perceptions of life inside student cohorts in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. Throughout this article, we argue that how teacher educators structure programs plays a significant role in how students become teachers; therefore teacher educators need to be aware of both the benefits and the challenges of organizing programs in cohorts. First, we have provided a rationale for adopting a cohort model in teacher education and review the existing literature on student cohort groups. Next, we have explained how the concept of *social capital* provides a theoretical framework for understanding the effect of structural arrangements on the professional socialization of student teachers.

RATIONALE

Increasingly, faculties of education, like other professional schools, are choosing to organize their students into cohorts to take many if not all of their courses together (Mandzuk & Hasinoff, 2002; Mather & Hanley, 1999; Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Cohorts provide students with an opportunity to belong to a supportive community of like-minded people. In addition, cohorts accommodate the many collaborative assignments commonly found in faculties of education, designed in part to socialize students into the analogous professional practices of teamwork

and collaboration. For program administrators, the use of cohorts provides a practical means for scheduling intact classes.

On the face of it, all these reasons for organizing students into cohorts are valid, but few studies provide empirical evidence to support the cohort model. Furthermore, most of these studies tend to overlook how students perceive their cohort experiences (Bochenek, 1999; Mather & Hanley, 1999; Melnychuk, 2001; Radencich, Thompson, Anderson, Oropallo, Fleege, Harrison, & Hanley, 1998; Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Do student teachers really value taking all their courses with the same individuals and are they, in fact, socialized more effectively into teaching than they would be otherwise? Or, as Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) have asked, can cohorts sometimes resemble dysfunctional families, allowing unwanted attitudes and negative relationships to develop?

COHORTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Mather and Hanley (1999), for example, describe student cohorts as a mixed blessing. They recognize the emotional and academic support that cohorts provide and the work ethic that can develop when people come to know and trust one another over time. However, they acknowledge the potential for competitive discord among students and the pressures on instructors that can sometimes develop. Radencich et al. (1998) find that team cultures are almost bimodal in their distribution, either highly positive or almost "pathologically" (p. 112) negative.

In many of these studies, researchers have observed that, although cohorts can be wonderfully supportive institutional structures, they can also "go bad." Among other themes, they note the family-like ethos that sometimes develops, various group pressures, and effects on students' interactions with instructors. Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) report a mainly negative picture of cohort life: they describe how critical incidents, strong personalities, and the breakdown of trust can undermine group culture. In particular, they suggest that organizing students into cohorts may exacerbate the influence of students who already dominate class discussions. The authors also argue that such students acquire increased power to sway others because of their continual contact with the same peer group and that this power may create negative norms that can work against instructors. Like Mather and Hanley (1999), they suggest that, through instructor scapegoating, cohort groups can get the upper hand in dealing with instructors who they consider to be incompetent, unreasonable, or demanding. In short, the research literature on cohorts reveals a number of legitimate concerns about this organizational practice.

In general, however, this literature lacks the conceptual grounding that is essential for understanding how the arrangements faculties make may affect the process of becoming a teacher. The concept of *social capital* (Adler & Kwon, 1998; Bourdieu, 1985; Clifton, 1999; Dika & Singh, 2002; Engestrom, 2001; Fukuyama, 1995; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001) fills this conceptual gap by linking the way educators structure preservice programs with such goals of teaching as fostering independent thinking, collegiality, and collaboration.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Woolcock (2001), whose definition of social capital is commonly cited, suggests that “social capital refers to the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively” (p. 13). The basic premise is that “one’s family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called upon in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and/or leveraged for material gain” (Woolcock, 2001, p. 12). In other words, what is essential to the concept of social capital is the relationship among individuals, their access to one another, and the benefits that can accrue from social networks. Like Bourdieu’s (1985) conceptualization of social capital, we have focused this study on what an individual gains as a consequence of group membership.

Putnam (2000) distinguishes between two distinct, but not mutually exclusive dimensions of social capital — bonding and bridging. Woolcock (2001) locates bonding in “relations among family members, close friends, and neighbours” (p. 13); in other words, bonding refers to the close inward-looking relations between like-minded individuals. Bridging, on the other hand, is located in relations with “more distant friends, associates, and colleagues” (p. 13); in other words, bridging refers to the more outward-looking relations between people with different interests and goals. In capturing the distinction between these two dimensions, Putnam (2002) suggests that “bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40” (pp. 22–23).

Woolcock (2001) cautions, however, that “social capital cannot be understood independently of its broader institutional environment” (p. 13). Faculties of education, therefore, must always take into account the broader community and school context in which teacher education is situated. Although they may benefit from developing social capital with their peers in a cohort, student teachers must also be aware of the importance of establishing other social networks.

The particular institutional context in combination with individual

factors, such as developmental readiness, may affect the degree to which student teachers develop social capital. For example, faculties often provide opportunities such as mock interviews, seminars, or interactive professional development sessions for student teachers to bridge to educators in the field. However, beginning student teachers are unlikely to realize the potential for developing social capital at such events. Graduating students, on the other hand, are more likely to recognize the social capital inherent in such opportunities and consciously try to make the kinds of connections that might eventually result in employment.

Clearly, not all social arrangements that faculties provide will be sources of social capital for student teachers. Coleman (1988) has identified four properties of social structures that increase the likelihood that institutions will generate social capital: closure, stability, dependence, and shared ideologies.

The first property, closure, means that relationships are highly interconnected within a particular group; all group members have access to one another with limited intervention from outsiders. Closure, according to Coleman (1988), is important for fostering a sense of trustworthiness in a social environment. Student cohort groups are examples of social structures in which trustworthiness can develop because they are relatively tight and closed networks of people who take most, if not all, of their courses together. In this respect, cohorts prepare student teachers for their professional roles as teachers where their social networks will include dense, overlapping, professional and social relationships.

The second property, stability, means that membership within a group changes relatively slowly over time. Student cohort groups experience few changes in membership, achieving stability that enables student teachers to develop effective group norms that "monitor and guide behaviour" (Coleman, 1988, p. 107). Arguably, cohorts may prepare student teachers to cope with similarly stable groups in school faculties where they will be expected to adhere to the cultural norms of the school.

The third property, dependence or what we prefer to call interdependence, means that group members must work together and rely on each other to achieve their purposes. Cohorts provide student teachers with many opportunities to work together to complete group assignments or to cope with a highly demanding workload. These experiences will no doubt be valuable when, as teachers, they share the workload with their colleagues in schools and participate in collaborative professional learning experiences (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2003).

The final property, shared ideology, means that group members have a common vision that provides them with a joint purpose. Student teachers

in cohorts are collectively exposed to the language, ideas, and philosophies of teaching that underpin early, middle, and senior years' instruction. Arguably, student teachers will be expected to conform to these same ideologies and to embrace the collective vision that drives school plans and mission statements.

These four properties may suggest that social capital is exclusively positive in nature, but as Portes and Landolt (1996) and Engestrom (2001) point out, social capital developed in groups is not always beneficial for individual members. This appreciation of both the positive and negative consequences of social capital informs our discussion of the findings.

METHOD

The Students and the Data

Our subjects were 239 student teachers and their instructors in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. On admission to the faculty, student teachers decide to specialize in early, middle, or senior years education. With the exception of two electives, student teachers in both the early- and middle-years programs take all of their courses in cohorts of 30 to 35 students. The senior-years program, however, has a somewhat different structure because student teachers split into smaller groups for a portion of their time to take courses in their major and minor specializations.

For this study, we designed and administered a comprehensive survey, *Measuring Social Capital in Cohort Groups*. A colleague, who was not in a position of power in relation to the students, invited them to participate in the study anonymously. We gathered the data that we report in this article from the final, open-ended section of the survey, which asks, "If you have any other thoughts about your experiences as a student teacher both inside and outside the cohort, please share them below."¹ Almost half the respondents completed this section of the survey. In addition, we analyzed the data from the focus groups we conducted with instructors.

Data Analysis

Our initial analysis of student teachers' and instructors' comments was exploratory. We wanted to be open to generating new ideas and expanding on existing theory as we worked between the relevant literature and the data. Consequently, in the initial stages, we followed what Coffey and Atkinson (1996, pp. 155–156) describe as an abductive approach to data analysis. "Essentially, abductive reasoning seems to capture more

productively how researchers in all disciplines actually think and work" (p. 56). It allows for a more central role for empirical research in the generation of ideas while, at the same time, it allows for a more dynamic interaction between theory and data.

We read students' written comments and the focus group transcripts three times to search for common tones. In general, the tone of both sets of comments was positive; in other words, student teachers and instructors favoured the cohort model over the traditional model that is prominent in many teacher-education programs (see Howey & Zimpher, 1989; Mather & Hanley, 1999). The next step in the analysis involved the identification of common themes. Using a frequency count, we identified the most prevalent comments and clustered them into themes. In a similar fashion to that of previous research on cohorts, we initially categorized these themes along positive and negative dimensions.

However, as we continued our individual and collective analyses, we concluded that many of the themes were related to the social structure of the cohorts and the networks and norms developed within them. Consequently, we found ourselves drawn to social capital as a theoretical framework for examining our data more closely, a perspective that allowed us to take both a broader and a deeper look at life inside student cohorts than has been reported to date.

FINDINGS

Closure and Stability

Students' experiences in cohorts are characterized by being closed and stable. As a consequence of the dense relationships in a cohort, student teachers create social obligations in relation to one another and develop trust in their social environment. For example, when one of our male student teachers created a plan for each member of his cohort to share summaries of the large number of assigned readings, he not only benefited personally, but so did all the other members of the cohort. The proliferation of these kinds of social obligations generates social capital that individuals may draw on when needed (Coleman, 1988). In particular, we found that developing social capital in cohorts enables students to move beyond the anonymity that these first-year student teachers experienced in their previous undergraduate years.

Being a member of a cohort has really helped me to overcome a large amount of stress dealing with the workload . . . overall, I find it very supportive and much friendlier

than my previous three years at university of only being known as a number. (female student, middle years)

I love being in a cohort. I feel that I can discuss things with others and that they actually know me as a person. I'm not just another face in the crowd! (female student, middle years)

This loss of anonymity that occurs in close-knit communities such as cohorts also results in greater demands for members to be accountable for their thoughts and actions. As the following comments point out, many student teachers believed that their own accountability increased as a consequence of being a member of a cohort.

I think being a member of a cohort means that you can't hide. You can't be anonymously absent, you can't slack off on your portion of the project and you have such a close-knit support system built into the model, that you have no excuses for not giving your all. We are all in this together to the end! (male student, senior years)

I have appreciated being a member of a cohort. When you get to know a group of people well, the accountability within that group increases. (female student, early years)

These comments and others like them underscore one of the benefits that student teachers gain from being in cohorts. A less-anticipated benefit of cohorts arises because students are members of what Coleman (1988, p. 108) defines as an "appropriable social organization" or one that "once brought into existence for one set of purposes, can also aid others, thus constituting social capital for use" (p. 188). The benefit of appropriable social relations are illustrated in the following comments from a first-year student teacher who reveals that she gained a sense of belonging to a community in which her relationships extended well beyond the faculty.

We actually do things together. For example, a group of us are going to play volleyball after today's meeting, then on Friday, we're going to play hockey. How cool is that? I'm closer to my classmates than I am to my own family. (female student, early years)

One instructor was struck by the degree of socializing within the cohort and compared it with the socializing that had occurred in classes she taught in the past.

It's not only that they're together here in the Faculty, they're doing things socially outside of their experiences in the Faculty. Large groups of students who didn't know one another before they came into the Faculty, do things together almost every weekend. It's playing hockey together or it's going to films together. They seem to have birthday parties for one another and I don't remember that in the old program. . . . I don't think there was

the socializing that there seems to be in the new program. (female instructor, middle years)

Some of these relationships develop far beyond casual friendships to more nurturing and supportive roles as the following comments suggest.

I feel I have “guardian angels” who look out for me. (female student, early years)

I feel that as a member of a cohort, it is my responsibility to support my classmates in whatever way possible, to ensure that we are able to become professionals together and that we do not allow any people to “fall by the wayside.” (female student, middle years)

Generally speaking, this sense that members of a cohort can count on each other during times of academic and personal stress occurred frequently. Student teachers perceived this social and emotional support as a major advantage of the cohort. We found evidence that student teachers attributed this support, at least in part, to the closeness and stability of their cohort.

Although there have been trying times due to the fact that we have been with the same people for two years, I believe that the cohort is a good idea. It allows us to lean on each other for support when times get tough. (male student, middle years)

These comments and others like them suggest that student teachers have developed an early understanding of the benefits of being a colleague. They recognize that, ideally, colleagues look out for one another and offer help when needed. Nevertheless, one female student teacher pointed out the challenges of this kind of collegial support.

The extent to which one relies on others in a cohort to me depends upon one’s a) personality, b) life cycle stage, and c) particular mix of people in the cohort. . . .

It is a challenge finding a balance between meeting one’s own needs and contributing to the welfare of everyone in the cohort. I regret limiting my involvement in meeting the needs of others but at certain stages, “self-protection” kicks in. (female student, middle years)

On one hand, this student teacher wanted to help her male colleague who was struggling academically, but, on the other hand, she was also keenly aware that she could not proofread every assignment he wrote. Her comment suggests that social relations sometimes demand more than students can give.

We became aware that the closure and stability of cohorts that work so well for most student teachers worked against others such as mature students, part-time students, or those who are weaker academically. The

following comment from a second-year student teacher indicates that the realities for mature students might be quite different from those of their younger cohort peers.

I may feel strongly compelled to participate in social activities but that does not mean that I do participate in these activities. As a somewhat more mature student, I choose not be involved in many activities because I do not define my personal or professional identity by how I like to party. Going out to drink does not enhance any qualities for me. (female student, senior years)

Part-time student teachers are also less likely to feel integrated into cohorts as the following comment from a first-year student teacher suggests.

I am a part-time student and as such I feel I am on the fringe of the cohort. I am able to observe the effects of the cohort on the other students but I do not feel that I am being benefited from them. . . . I feel I am part of the class but not a part of the cohort. (female student, early years)

Finally, student teachers who are weaker academically might also be at a disadvantage within cohorts as one instructor suggests.

I think some of the low-end [students] in each group may not be served that well. Because so much of what we do is in groups, their inadequacies become very public. There's no way for them to not show that they don't know. . . ." (female instructor, middle years)

Interdependence and Shared Ideologies

Our sense that social capital is not an unmitigated good became stronger when we examined comments that crystallized the effects of the other two properties of social structures: interdependence and shared ideologies. Although interdependence is what most student teachers appear to value about cohorts, some find this structural arrangement to be stifling. These students may more highly value the opportunity to bridge to others on their own terms. The following comments provide evidence of this perspective.

I do not enjoy being part of a cohort because it makes me feel that I am back in high school. Being in a cohort is uncomfortable because I feel forced into the situation of making friends. . . . I don't feel the same freedom I had in the Faculty of Arts where I developed friendships when I wanted to. (male student, senior years)

I was very much upset by the cohort system when I first entered the Faculty. It was too much like being in high school again. . . . I liked the diversity of relationships that developed throughout my first degree. (male student, senior years)

Indeed, as another instructor pointed out, not all student teachers willingly participate in group activities.

I remember this one guy leaving my class with a stick and his skates and I said something about a hockey game and he gave me this look that said, "If I had any choice at all I wouldn't be dragging my stick and my skates to school" but I guess it was the group thing and he wanted to take part. (male instructor, middle years)

This comment and others like it suggest that cohorts place unique demands on their members. As instructors, we became aware that we were collectively referring to each of the cohorts by certain personality traits, which, upon reflection, were similar to those of the strongest members. The comments of two student teachers suggest that these group identities were just as evident to the students.

It is obvious to all, I believe, how different the cohorts are. Those of us in this cohort know we are seen as the "gangish," more social and more vocal. This is something that bonds us. (female student, middle years)

I am glad we are organized into cohorts. I feel that our cohort has a very strong social bond and we all support each other tremendously. I feel we have become a "gang." (female student, early years)

Sometimes these strong collective identities led to rivalries between cohorts. The following comment from a second-year student teacher suggests that not only were students aware of how cohorts differed from one another, but they were also aware of the competitive tension that sometimes exists between cohorts, a downside of social capital.

Because of the cohort-segregated classes, there's bound to be animosity and competition between the two groups. They hold stereotypes and prejudices against each other and are reluctant to join in any out-of-school meetings. (male student, middle years)

Our data suggest that another downside of generating bonding social capital can result in a tendency for cohort members to think and behave alike. Cohort members may be expected to develop shared ideologies as a result of the closed, stable nature of their relationships and the effort of faculty members to expose student teachers to the language and concepts that undergird current educational praxis. Various forms of peer pressure,

both subtle and direct, have an effect on the ideas and actions of cohort members. The following comment illustrates this point.

I feel our particular cohort bonded early but now, near the end, I feel a little pressure to fit in with the group. It seems we have eliminated our own individuality. (female student, middle years)

We found that, in addition to challenging a student teacher's sense of individuality, the shared ideologies that develop among members of a cohort can work against what faculties believe they are promoting. Two student teachers allude to subtle pressures to conform.

I think certain patterns a cohort falls into can put pressures on individuals. . . . For instance, if most members of the cohort come late to class or talk poorly of the Education program, those values can erase the positive values that the Faculty tries to establish. Nobody wants to be a "brown-noser" even at this stage of one's professional career. (female student, senior years)

There are times when certain groups are formed that create reputations such as being tough or nonchalant towards school. It makes it difficult to adhere to classes (e.g. ask questions when you know everyone around you is bored/annoyed because you extended the class.) (male student, senior years)

These comments highlight negative norms that can develop as a result of peer pressure in tightly knit groups such as cohorts. Sometimes these norms are anti-intellectual in nature, where "being cool" is perceived as being more socially acceptable than being engaged in what goes on in class. The following comments suggest that student teachers are aware of the social consequences of rejecting the negative norms of their respective cohorts.

I really don't like many of these people all that much — they are too "cool" for me. They think I'm a nerd or a geek. This is disappointing not because I want their acceptance but because it shows that someone like myself who enjoys participating in class cannot do so without becoming a social outcast. (male student, senior years)

I did not enjoy being a guinea pig in this cohort model experiment. I felt intense pressure to conform: socially, academically, morally, etcetera. As well, I learned about the ironic anti-intellectualism that the teaching profession displays. It was impossible to have intelligent conversations with my cohort about anything. The cohort just moaned about everything — all the time! It contributed to my feelings of anger, depression, and boredom. (male student, senior years)

Few opportunities occurred for student teachers to stray beyond the tightly structured activities of the classroom and the cohort. But, more

importantly, perhaps, these comments and others like them suggest that in the hothouse of cohorts, some students allowed little tolerance for diverse ideas and intellectual debate.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, our findings echo the themes that other researchers have identified in previous cohort studies (Mather & Hanley, 1999; Shapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). However, by examining these themes through the lens of social capital theory, we disentangled the effects of cohorts on different types of students. Using the two dimensions of social capital and the four properties of social structures, we achieved a better understanding of the benefits and limitations of the cohort model and a better sense of those students best served and those least served by this structural arrangement.

From our interview and survey data, we conclude that the many challenges of student cohorts were attributable to too much bonding and not enough bridging. For example, some student teachers stifled their own growth as individuals because the dominant personalities in their cohorts unduly influenced them. In this respect, the interactions among cohort members may not be unlike the interactions among pupils and for that matter, among teachers. The challenge for those responsible for leading such groups is to ensure, as much as possible, that the voices of all group members are heard.

Strong group identities emerged and became noticeable to both student teachers and their instructors. Under these circumstances, diverse voices were seldom heard. Furthermore, our interview data suggest that student teachers identify less with the Faculty and its programs and more with their respective cohorts. Perhaps, if teacher educators were to allow more flexibility in their timetables, student teachers could take more courses with students in other cohorts which might enable them to develop bridging relationships with others. This would be especially valuable if it also served to expand their professional networks once they became practising teachers. From our research, we strongly suggest that student teachers should understand the importance of developing bridging social networks with other educators to combat what has been identified as the "ideological insularity which currently plagues our field" (Zeichner & Liston, 1990, p. 25). By organizing the students in our study into cohorts, we may have unwittingly created an environment that has inhibited rather than enhanced the disposition of some student teachers to develop bridging social capital. Indeed, our data suggest that the closed and stable nature of cohorts, so

conducive for developing bonding social capital, may actually work against some of the long-term aims of faculties of education and of the profession. Within our student cohorts, we found that the interdependence and shared ideologies characteristic of cohorts created a culture of conformity that provided advantages for certain types of students while disadvantaging others.

Students who were natural leaders, who were socially oriented, and who were weaker academically seemed to be best served by being in a cohort. Students who are leaders had the opportunity to use their skills of persuasion and debate. However, such students might quickly monopolize the dynamics of the group in much the same way that the strongest teachers on a staff may presume to speak for everyone else. Our student data also pointed out that students who are socially oriented are also well served from the experience of cohort groups because they can relate to a group of like-minded people and are able to benefit from the collaborative culture that is pervasive in faculties of education.

Although the data from our open-ended question has led us to believe that weaker students might not be well served by being members of cohorts, there is another perspective. Specifically these students may actually benefit from the bonding that provides them with a strong sense of academic and social support. However, although this support may increase graduation rates, teacher educators and co-operating teachers may end up spending an inordinate amount of time and energy on such students. Furthermore, by taking a longer view of things, we suggest that academically weaker students who enter the teaching profession may be unable to cope without such a support system. In other words, support afforded weaker student teachers by their peers may be of questionable benefit for the teaching profession or for the students that they will eventually teach.

We are not convinced that student teachers who are less vocal, who are academically strong, or who are part-time students are particularly well served by the cohort model. Our data indicate that less vocal students lost their voices once the cohorts established their dynamics because the most vocal students dominated class discussions and the quieter students become more passive.

We were concerned by the number of strong academic students who wrote that they sometimes felt "intellectually claustrophobic" within their cohorts and craved more opportunities to bridge to others. For student teachers who are truly life-long learners, the effort of having to restrain themselves in class for fear that others might marginalize them can also be personally draining. If these student teachers are among those who are least served by being organized in cohorts, as our research data has noted, then

teacher educators need to structure programs to find a better balance between bonding and bridging.

We have also spoken to students who are enrolled part-time and who can see for themselves the benefits that their peers gain as result of being full-time members of cohorts. Part-time student teachers take a reduced course load and often miss out on the social and emotional support of their peers. We wondered if this kind of marginalization had any effect on their success in the program and possibly on their success as beginning teachers.

In the final analysis, teacher educators must consider whether the negative consequences of developing social capital in cohorts outweigh the benefits. In spite of the limitations that some student teachers in our study readily identified, most student teachers in this study found their cohort experiences to be valuable. In particular, they valued the social and emotional support and sense of community that they acquired during their preservice program. This experience of developing social capital in cohorts provided student teachers with the necessary skills that they can use to nurture relationships with colleagues in the complex, often labyrinthine social networks of the teaching profession.

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NOTE

- 1 The results from the quantitative component of this study have been presented in an article currently under review.

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