Mitigating First Year Burnout: How Reimagined Partnerships Could Support Urban Middle Level Teachers

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Abstract

Given what we know about new teacher attrition—most teachers leave within their first five years in the field—specialized support during early years of teaching is critical. But should this support look different across different contexts and grade bands? What does supportive teacher education and induction look like for middle level educators preparing to teach in urban settings? This essay describes steps taken to design a cross-institutional, collaborative three-year residency program for K-8 educators, and speaks to the importance of reimagined co-teaching, critical, and cross-institutional partnerships in middle grades teacher education. The authors urge readers to consider how to implement similar modifications in their own spaces to create powerful, collaborative middle grades teacher education and induction.

Introduction

Studies show that there are striking differences in the qualifications of teachers across schools and that urban schools in particular have lesser-qualified teachers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). To address this, universities and school districts have partnered to create residency programs that span university and school spaces. For example, the Boston Teacher Residency model—a partnership between Boston Public Schools and the University of Massachusetts Boston— is a one-year residency program for college graduates who want to transition into teaching. But what about residency programs for pre-college graduates who already know they want to become a teacher? And, what about support programs beyond the first year in the field? To address these gaps in the teacher residency literature and programming, we implemented a three-year residency model designed to support and retain highly qualified teachers in urban schools. Different from other residency programs, the program described below begins in a teacher candidate's final year of teacher certification coursework, continues through his/her second year of teaching, and includes program components designed to overcome shortcomings typical of urban teacher induction. These typical shortcomings—described as "What we Know" below— are shared first, followed by a description of the critical and collaborative partnership work that we think makes our residency model unique for middle grades teachers in particular. We share preliminary results, our work moving forward based on those

results, and invite others to consider what supportive teachers education and induction could and should look like for middle level educators preparing to teach in urban settings.

What We Know: There is High Teacher Attrition, Especially in Middle Schools

Although there is debate about teacher attrition rates, researchers suggest that anywhere from 17- 50% of new teachers leave the field within the first five years of their career (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; Ingersoll, 2001). This is troubling when one considers recent longitudinal studies that show that students impacted by high teacher turnover score lower in ELA and mathematics (e.g., Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012), and that more experienced teachers have better classroom management, differentiation strategies, and are better able to increase student self- esteem (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014).

Researchers have suggested several causes of high teacher attrition. For example, limited training in teaching methods and pedagogy during teacher preparation seems to be related to high teacher attrition. According to Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2014), preservice teachers with limited practice teaching, observation of other teaching, and feedback on teaching during initial preparation are more likely to leave within their first three years. Challenging working conditions, the absence of a supportive professional culture, and an overwhelming workload also contribute to high teacher attrition (Goldring et al., 2014; Ingersoll, 2001).

Finally, a lack of mentorship contributes to teachers leaving (Gray & Taie, 2015). Typically, even those early career teachers who take part in formal mentoring programs find the support offered to be insufficient (Gray & Taie, 2015; Kardos & Johnson, 2008).

What is particularly troubling is that teacher turnover is higher in high-poverty schools, and seems to be *highest* in urban middle schools. For instance, in New York City, turnover in middle schools is highest, with two-thirds of educators (66%) exiting within the first five years (Marinell & Coca, 2013). In her study on middle school teachers' pathways to certification, Hesson (2016) found that half of her participants wanted to leave middle grades teaching within the first four years of teaching. She suggests that university teacher preparation "cannot exist in a vacuum separate from K-12 schools where graduates will eventually be employed" (Hesson, 2016, p. 12). Other scholars agree and suggest that while teacher preparation, including field-based experiences, is a critical component of teacher learning, inservice educators also need "appropriate induction,…ongoing professional learning, collaboration with colleagues, and feedback on their performance" (Council of Chief State School Office (CCSSO), 2012, p. 3). Jointly run induction programs, with an eye towards teacher retention, could be particularly useful at the middle grades level where teacher attrition is highest.

Discussions of Race are Critical

We also know that teachers are not prepared to talk about race, despite continued calls for teacher education programs to center on the development of teachers' political responsiveness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999); understandings of how Whiteness operates in schools (Matias, 2015); and social justice pedagogies (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Conklin & Hughes, 2016). Gay and Kirkland (2003) found that many preservice teachers maneuver around racial issues, using resistance strategies such as silence, diversion, and guilt to avoid important conversations that might lead to more critically conscious educators. A lack of understanding around issues of race and culture, and how inequity functions in society is one explanation for this resistance. For example, a recent report released by *The Atlantic* in January 2017 shared Rich Milner's preliminary findings on 450 teachers' beliefs about race: "Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that race should be

discussed in classrooms; they felt woefully unprepared to lead such conversations; and they strongly rejected discussing racial violence" (Anderson, 2017, para. 2). According to Milner, "Basically teachers said, 'You've twisted my arm. We should talk about race. Nope, I don't feel prepared to do that. And I'm definitely not going to [talk about] violence against black bodies.' That's where we are in 2017" (Anderson, 2017, para. 2).

These findings are particularly problematic for middle level educators given what we know about the developmental nature of middle school students. For instance, we know that young adolescents engage in frequent examination and questioning of their identity throughout middle school (Erikson, 1968), including exploration of cultural identities (Gay, 1994). We also know that middle schoolers demonstrate heightened social consciousness (Berman, 1997). Cook, Howell, and Faulkner (2016) suggest several elements that should be included in middle grades teacher preparation, including "a thorough understanding of the developmental spectrum of young adolescents" (p. 4). Taken together, this literature suggests the importance of supporting middle level teachers in conversations around race, social identity, and the emotional development of their students, especially in a time of increased racialized violence in our country.

Collaboration is Key

Finally, we know that collaboration seems to play a key role in limiting teacher attrition and may also directly impact student achievement. Recent research on student performance in language arts and math has demonstrated positive correlation between student achievement and the creation of a school culture of collaboration and collegiality (Palmisano, 2013). Similarly, the development of teachers' "social capital"—the level and type of interaction and collaboration among teachers—has been cited as a significant predictor of student achievement gains *above and beyond* teacher experience or ability in the classroom.

Leana (2011) found that although coursework, years of teaching experience, and professional development are clearly critical in a teacher's ability to guide students to high levels of achievement, more important to student outcomes is the building of social capital in a school through close, professional relationships

among teachers. Other researchers have found that collaboration supports teachers in group problem-solving to address teaching challenges (Fahey, 2011); increases teacher confidence, trust, and voice (Bisplinghoff, 2005; Hudson, 2005); and builds a sense of collective responsibility for the school and student learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Teacher collaboration seems to be particularly important in middle schools, especially when teachers are striving to focus on issues of equity, social justice, and race. For example, Harrison (2015), in her study on teaching social justice through mathematics in middle schools found that "it was through conversing with colleagues who challenged some of my assumptions and gave me suggestions about pedagogy that I was able to develop a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of mathematics through social justice" (p. 10).

So, as a field, we know some things to be true. Teacher turnover continues to be a problem, particularly in urban middle schools. Research suggests that teacher attrition can be attributed to various pitfalls across preservice *and* inservice teacher education, leading some to point to joint efforts across universities and schools as a way forward. We also know that teachers struggle to talk about race. This becomes particularly problematic for middle level teachers who are working with diverse young adolescents who are engaging in important identity, cultural, and social development. Finally, it appears that teacher collaboration has some benefits for teachers and students, and may be key to keeping good teachers teaching longer.

What We Proposed

Drawing on the literature above, leaders from several schools within a large urban district and faculty from an urban research university partnered to design a university-school teacher residency program. The teacher residency program—*Collaboration and Reflection to Enhance Atlanta Teacher Effectiveness*, or CREATE for short—is a three-year model designed to retain highly qualified teachers in urban schools. The residency program begins in a teacher's final year of university coursework, continues through his/her second year of teaching, and includes program components designed to overcome shortcomings typical of teacher induction. And though components of

this program have changed from the original design in 2012 (Cross, Underwood, Hearn, Taylor, & Parrish, in press), collaboration has always been at the heart of the work. Figure 1 outlines the overall structure of the most recent iteration of the three-year residency program.

As outlined in Figure 1 on the following page, the CREATE Year 1 model includes: "Critical Friends Groups"; mindfulness training to build teachers' capacity for flexible and reflexive thinking; carefully matched cooperating and mentor teachers; and a site-based project director who acts as a liaison between university and schools. Though teacher residents are placed in different schools within the high-needs district hosting this program, they come together at least once per month in three- hour long meetings facilitated by the school-based residency director.

During these meetings, residents engage in Critical Friends work (a key feature of our collaborative, partnership work and explained in more detail below) and work through Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT)—a mindfulness curriculum developed through an Emory University-Tibet partnership. Recent research indicates that mindfulness training for teachers can increase overall well-being and teaching self-efficacy and support teachers' efforts to improve classroom climate and teacher-child relationships (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Poulin, 2009). Working closely with the residency director (who is trained in CBCT), the residents work through a series of mindfulness practices to cultivate stable attention, build emotional awareness, and strengthen the ability to care for others.

Feedback from residents was positive during the first year of this work, and CBCT is now offered to all teachers in all CREATE schools, further strengthening opportunities for collaboration and shared experiences among teachers. Finally, Year 1 residents are assigned both a cooperating teacher (the person they share a classroom with during student teaching) and a mentor teacher (another veteran educator in the building who is outside of their practice classroom). The idea here is that residents have multiple levels of support and opportunities for collaboration with a variety of veteran educators in their building.

CREATE supports for residents, veteran educators and schools

FEATURES	Year 1 pre-service	Year 2 in-service	Year 3 in-service
PROGRESSIVE CORE CLASSROOM ROLES *Purpose: to increase responsibilities and independence as teaching abilities improve.*	Student Teacher Role (some residents paired)	Co-Teacher Role (paired with other Y2 resident)	Lead Teacher Role
ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR EACH RESIDENT *Purpose: to provide additional support mechanisms and incentivize participation.*	Support of Cooperating Teacher; Support of Mentor; Support of on-site Program Director; Stipend	Support of co-teacher (other Y2 resident); Support of Mentor; Support of in-site Director; Paid summer internship; Competitive teacher wage	Support of Mentor; Support of on-site Director; Teacher salary plus stipend
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS (AND ALL EDUCATORS) IN THE SCHOOL *Purpose: to build a community foundation of collaboration & reflection*	Critical Friendship Participation; Mindfulness Training	Critical Friendship Participation; Mindfulness Training	Critical Friendship Participation; Mindfulness Training

Figure 1. CREATE Residency Model

Moving to Year 2 of the model, newly certified residents continue to work with their mentors and engage in Critical Friends and CBCT mindfulness meetings with their cohort, but they are now partnered with another CREATE resident to *co-teach* for their first official year in the classroom. We describe this co-teaching below as another key feature of this work. Finally, in Year 3 of the program, residents take on the sole responsibility of a classroom as they continue to work with their mentor teacher to hone their craft. Below we explore the notion of collaborative partnership within this residency design, and focus specifically on *critical friendship work, co-teaching,* and *cross-institutional collaboration.* As we further explicate below, we feel these partnership components have the potential to not only keep middle grades teachers teaching, but may also help them dig deeply into race and issues of justice and equity in their classroom spaces.

Critical Friendship Work

As outlined in the literature above, teachers are better when they have opportunities to collaborate. We also know that teachers need to talk about issues of race and inequity in schools, but feel woefully underprepared to do so (Anderson, 2017). With that in mind, the CREATE program incorporates SRI Critical Friendship (CF) groups (http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org) as one form of collaborative partnership between teachers. Given the mission of SRI—"to support educators to be fiercely committed to educational equity and excellence"—it fit nicely within a model designed to create partnerships between teachers working in urban schools. This group is facilitated by a trained CF coach (in this case, the residency director) and is supported by the establishment of a set of norms specifically designed to help participants "respect each other's vulnerability" (Palmer, 1998, p. 150). The group uses protocols, or structured conversations, to help residents engage collaboratively with the ideas, dilemmas, and student- and educator-made artifacts brought to the group by individual members. Most protocols used by the group involve the use of probing (or powerful and open) questions;

according to the SRI website, these questions are designed to "help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand", "challenge assumptions", "encourage perspective taking", and might even "create a paradigm shift" for teachers engaging in this work. Used in Year 1 of the residency program, CF meetings are designed as a space for student teachers to come together and talk about dilemmas of practice with one another in a safe space, void of evaluation but with the goal of pushing new teachers towards more equitable ways of thinking and being in the classroom. As residents move into the second year of the residency program as co-teachers (explained below), they continue to meet, though this time in small groups with beginning *and* veteran educators.

Preliminary results from critical friendship work in early years of this residency model indicated that residents felt that CF groups were a safe place to come together and present dilemmas of practice. As one resident reported, "It's not just this one-size fits all answer, but it's more of a reflective process with an entire group. You're reflecting and going back through your head with an entire group." Another resident reported that CF work, and the use of protocols in particular, had helped him "approach problems more deliberately, more patiently and from more diverse angles." As he explained, "I've been able to transfer that into lots of areas of teaching: relationships with students, with teachers, with problems that kids are having, with their social lives, just all kinds of problems."

Co/Partner-Teaching

One of the hallmarks of the CREATE program is the design of Year 2—residents first year in the field as certified teachers. Instead of placing newly graduated residents in their own classroom, this model places *two* residents together to work as teaching partners. Recent studies have found that opportunities for collaborative or paired-teaching during preservice training helps build pedagogical skill among new teachers (Baker & Milner, 2006). In reportedly successful models, both teachers in a collaborative pair are equal partners, working together as lead teachers to achieve more thoughtful planning, greater differentiation in instruction, and more individualized attention for each child. This re-conceptualized model not only lightens the load for first year teachers (there are two teachers teaching the same

number of students that would typically be assigned to one teacher), but also provides built-in partnership as residents grapple with how to set up their classroom, develop relationships with students, and design and implement lessons. In addition to this build-in partnership, residents are also encouraged to collaborate and reflect with other colleagues in and outside their building. In fact, because there are two teachers in one classroom, each resident has a few hours of release time every other Tuesday to step out of the classroom to meet with their mentors or attend CF and CBCT meetings with the residency director and half of their cohort group.

Preliminary results related to partner/co-teaching in Year 2 indicate that resident pairs have developed working relationships that offer additional support as compared to a traditional model of first year teaching. For example, one resident spoke about having a good "working relationship" with her co-teacher and indicated that they shared equally the responsibility of teaching and supporting. Another pair found that co-teaching allowed space for reflection, doubt, growth, and shared learning. Regarding the benefits of co-teaching, another resident explained, "As far as the co-teaching, I feel like it's working out really well. We talk a lot about our fears, what we could have done better, allow ourselves space to say we will not know it all our first year, and offering insight and help when we can." This became particularly important for resident pairs working at schools serving historically minoritized youth. For example, one Asian American male resident spoke often about how much he was learning from his African American male co-teaching partner: "He just reinforces a lot of the classroom management stuff and it helps out. Because sometimes the kids don't react as well with me as they do with him. I think that helps out a lot." This feedback from middle level residents at the midpoint of their second year indicates promise for the effectiveness of this reimagined co-teaching model for middle level educators in their first year of teaching, especially as we consider the interdisciplinary nature of middle grades teaching.

Cross-Institutional Partnerships

Despite the promising results shared above, both formal and informal research into residents' experiences in CREATE highlights several pitfalls of experience. For example, Year 2 residents felt they needed more training in co-

teaching and additional planning time during school hours. Residents also suggested the need for more communication between CREATE leaders, school administrators, and university faculty. Regarding CF work, while most Year 2 residents reported the importance of participating in critical friendship, their level of enthusiasm for the work appeared slightly lower than amongst Year 1 residents: "I seemed to get more out of my CF when I was a Year 1 resident. For some reason, it just seemed more relatable to me." Other residents have brought up the need for more focused discussions on differences between CREATE schools; as one resident pointed out, "I teach at a traditional neighborhood public school with mostly Black and Brown kids, but other residents teach at a charter school with mostly White kids. We don't talk about this." Related to this, residents spoke often about the disconnect between their university curriculum and what played out in schools during their first and second years in the residency program. As one resident suggested, "We talked a lot about culturally responsive pedagogy and stuff that I think was great, but there does not seem to be room for that here. It's just paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. It might happen at another CREATE school down the street, but not here."

As we began preliminary analysis of these data, we found ourselves wondering how increased partnerships between universities and schools might help address some of these needs and students' responses to the overall residency experience. While several university faculty had been involved in the planning of this residency work from the beginning—for example, the first author of this paper co-wrote the two grants that fund this work—they were not typically involved in the day-to-day planning of the residency programming. Similarly, while CREATE leadership, school principals, and university faculty were together two to three times per year at meetings related to the residency program, there were few opportunities for school-based educators to learn about and/or inform the work of the university. Also missing were voices from the district level; we knew, for example, that the district had several new teacher induction programs but we were unsure how those programs might work with/flow from university and residency curriculum and programming.

With that in mind, we pursued additional funding from our state student achievement agency to explore what it looks like for university

faculty, teachers and leaders from local schools, *and* district leaders in charge of new teacher induction to partner to consider results from the first years of the residency program. This initiative provides opportunities for educators across multiple institutions—schools, universities, and districts—to be in each other's spaces, and then come back together to share noticing and wonderings that might start to inform our collective work. For example, a school or residency leader might come to the university to sit in or co-teach a teacher preparation course focused on young adolescent cultural identity development or critical race theory for middle level educators. Alternatively, a faculty member from GSU might spend time at a district meeting on new teacher induction or participate in CF groups with residents and/or veteran educators at CREATE schools. It is only when we know what goes on in each other's spaces that we can begin to partner in the work of training and supporting middle level teachers.

Another impetus for this cross-institutional partnership was to address the lack of criticality and authentic discussions of race, racism, Whiteness, and critical pedagogies during beginning teaching. Though middle grades teachers enrolled in CREATE report feeling supported in critical friendship work, and point to some benefits to co-teaching during the first year in the field as fully certified teachers, we were concerned at the lack of criticality surfacing in exit interviews, reflections, and especially across teaching practices. In short, residents did not appear to be drawing on readings from their university coursework focused on issues of race, equity, access, or critical pedagogies. We hope that authentic partnerships across these spaces— university, school, and district—will help all of us consider how to move our partnership structures forward into even more critical spaces. We imagine, for example, that faculty engaging in CF work with new and veteran educators at CREATE schools (as proposed above) would be mutually beneficial; faculty could infuse recent research on race in schools during conversations centered on teachers' problems of practice, while practicing teachers could offer feedback to university faculty on the realities of individual CREATE schools that would work to inform and *reform* university-based teacher preparation curriculum.

This partnership between university faculty (who read and research within spaces of critical

race theory, Whiteness studies, and critical pedagogies), teachers and schools leaders (who work with marginalized youth daily), and district leaders (who understand the politics and bureaucracy operating within large urban districts) seems a fruitful way forward to continue explorations into increased criticality across all of our teacher education spaces. This university-school-district collaborative work will also mirror for our residents the importance of having multiple partners as we all work to make sense of the complex world of urban middle grades teaching.

Where We are Now

A critical component of this work is how we conceptualize partnerships; all partners conceptualize teacher education as "common work for which they share responsibility, authority, and accountability covering all aspects of program development and implementation" (NCATE, 2010, p. 6). We have worked hard to reimagine the notion of partnership in this work, especially as it relates to better urban middle grades teacher preparation. Instead of implementing standard teacher learning communities, we have partnered teachers together in critical friendship designed to help uncover bias and sometimes tacitly-held deficit views of children and families.

As we review our results, however, we have a long way to go. We ask ourselves, how might these more critical teacher learning communities focus even more explicitly on issues of race and justice in middle grades spaces? Instead of conceptualizing partnerships in teacher's first year in the field through mentorship programs, or through more standard co-teaching models, we created a model that put *two novice teachers together* in one classroom. This partnership model has the potential to provide teachers more space to reflect on their teaching alongside another novice teacher, and might even help teachers engage in conversations around race and justice in their curriculum and in their interactions with students and families, though we are not there yet. While tensions surrounding race and inequities across CREATE schools comes up in resident interviews only when we ask about it directly (and even then, the answers are brief), we are excited to consider what it *could* look like for partner teachers to be critical eyes for one another as they interact with historically marginalized youth.

Considering how modified critical friendship and more nuanced university-school-district partnerships could inform this work remains essential to the original goals of this residency program. Finally, our most recent work re-conceptualizes what it means for institutions to partner in the work of educating middle level teachers. For us, it is more than meeting once or twice per year; we need to be in each others' spaces in order to learn from and with one another, instead of pointing fingers in uninformed and damaging ways when we are told that urban schools are failing. In fact, we have continued to consider who is missing at our table as we travel across spaces, and we are investigating ways to bring community members into this important work as well. In this way, we continue to push ourselves to re-conceptualize partnership in big and important ways. We hope you will join us; we would love even more partners in this work.

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