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# Drawing on the Layers of a Partnership to Prepare Middle Level Teachers

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## Drawing on the Layers of a Partnership to Prepare Middle Level Teachers

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### Abstract

The University of Kentucky (UK) and the University of Louisville (UL) are located approximately 90 miles from each other in Kentucky. They are the only two research-intensive institutions in the state, and both have middle level teacher education programs preparing candidates in school-embedded clinical sites. Both teacher preparation programs are guided by the requirements from accrediting bodies, AMLE Teacher Preparation Standards (AMLE, 2012) and the missions of our institutions. In this essay, we will describe our collaborative partnership and how two teacher educators from two institutions utilize school-embedded clinical sites to connect and prepare middle level teacher candidates with the end goal of improved educational experiences for young adolescents through teachers prepared to teach them.

### Introduction

Collaboration and partnerships are the current trend in educator preparation. Professional learning communities are being implemented in schools with a focus on improving the educational experiences of students, and because of changing standards, universities are looking for ways to strengthen school partnerships to provide better experiences for teacher candidates. While the most prominent calls for partnerships have focused on those between P12 schools and universities, there has not been a focus on partnerships *between* institutions of higher education.

The University of Kentucky (UK) and the University of Louisville (UL) are located approximately 90 miles from each other in the two largest cities in Kentucky. They are the only two research-intensive institutions in the state, and both have middle level teacher education programs preparing candidates in school-embedded clinical sites. Both teacher preparation programs are guided by the requirements from accrediting bodies, AMLE Teacher Preparation Standards, (AMLE, 2012) and the missions of their respective institutions. Of the many requirements for the programs, standard two from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) requires institutions to build strong partnerships that positively impact student learning (CAEP, 2013). Collaboration between the two largest institutions in our state creates opportunities for making a larger impact on the education of young adolescents in the geographic region. In

this essay, we will describe our collaborative partnership and how two teacher educators from two institutions utilize school-embedded clinical sites to connect and prepare middle grades teacher candidates with the end goal of improved educational experiences for young adolescents through teachers prepared to teach them.

As is typical of many institutions, each of our colleges of education have one faculty member dedicated to middle grades education. While many of our colleagues have experiences in middle school classrooms, the two of us represent the middle grades programs at our respective institutions. Our partnership began as we each sought opportunities to discuss middle level education, the preparation and certification of middle grades teachers in our state, and programmatic structures that would lead to a well-prepared cadre of teachers for young adolescents. Given our shared interests and aspirations for our individual programs, as well as the close geographic proximity for our candidates, the partnership developed from a mutual desire to build a shared understanding of middle grades education, further develop our clinically-based teacher preparation programs, and a natural inclination to collaborate, which we believe developed from our own experiences as middle grades teachers. As the partnership has grown and changed over time, our purpose has remained the same. We desire to maintain a shared understanding of practice between us, as teacher educators, and develop that shared understanding among our candidates so they will be better prepared to engage in collaborative

relationships as well as enact developmentally responsive practices. The majority of our students go on to positions in the immediate geographic areas of our universities. They often end up working side-by-side in the same school building, and in some cases, on the same team. We believe the partnership between the two institutions gives the candidates a jumpstart on working together, learning together, and using that knowledge to ensure better practice in their classrooms which hopefully provides better learning for their students.

### **Layers of a Partnership**

We have an intentional design to our partnership that is grounded in the AMLE Teacher Preparation Standards (2012) and our universities' programs' goals and expectations. When we step back and consider the nature of our decisions, we view the process as a recursive, collaborative experience where we work as critical colleagues to make sound pedagogical choices for our teacher candidates. All of our decisions are based on a goal to design our programs to prepare our candidates to be effective teachers, ultimately equipping them to provide challenging, relevant, and developmentally responsive opportunities for learning. The layers of our partnership are anchored in improving educational experiences for young adolescent students in our state. Five distinct aspects of our work are interconnected and dependent upon each other: 1) Critical Colleague, 2) School-based University Classrooms, 3) Livestreaming Lessons, 4) Shared Supervision of Student Teachers, and 5) International Collaboration. In Figure 1, we have attempted to illustrate our view of these components followed by a more detailed description of each.

We view the five aspects of our partnership nested within each other and organized in the graphic to show the level of significance they have on/in our programs (see Figure 1). The outer layer, Critical Colleague, is the most significant element contributing to and supporting each of the other layers nested within the work we do as colleagues. International Collaboration is the smallest element in our partnership but grows from each of the elements in which it is nested. In the graphic, we have attempted to illustrate our view of these components followed by a more detailed description of each.

### **Critical Colleague**

As colleagues in the same state, we come to this collaborative relationship seeking to construct a shared understanding of effective middle grades practices and build on each other's strengths and the strengths of each other's programs. This relationship grounds our partnership as we consider each other critical friends. Our regular conversations foster a supportive relationship where we are free to question, critique, challenge, and support each other as we develop innovative instructional ideas, plan learning experiences for our candidates, and ensure that they are all prepared to teach young adolescents. This aspect of our partnership directly benefits the development of our teacher candidates, which in turn affects their teaching of middle level students.

### **School-based University Classroom**

Both of our programs have designated school-based university classrooms where we provide on-site teacher education coursework. These clinical sites allow our candidates to engage in a school culture as participants in the community and not simply observers of the activities. The design of these clinical sites was meant to create a space where our candidates could have consistent interactions with young adolescents, middle grades teachers, and school administration as well as observe and participate in effective teaching and management practices. They are able to see and engage in the complex culture of a middle school on a regular basis. While these interactions and experiences help candidates develop appropriate dispositions, self confidence in their ability to be a middle grades teacher, and a reality-based perspective of the life of a middle grades teacher, the ultimate beneficiaries are the young adolescent students who eventually will be the students of these candidates.

### **Livestreaming Lessons**

We intentionally design learning experiences for our teacher candidates that connect them with one another throughout their teacher education programs, modeling a team approach to teaching and learning. Just as we are working to develop a shared understanding as teacher educators, we also want candidates to have a sense of shared goals of and expectations for teaching young adolescents. To that end, our teacher candidates connect virtually to observe



# Cross-Institutional Partnership



## Layers of a Partnership

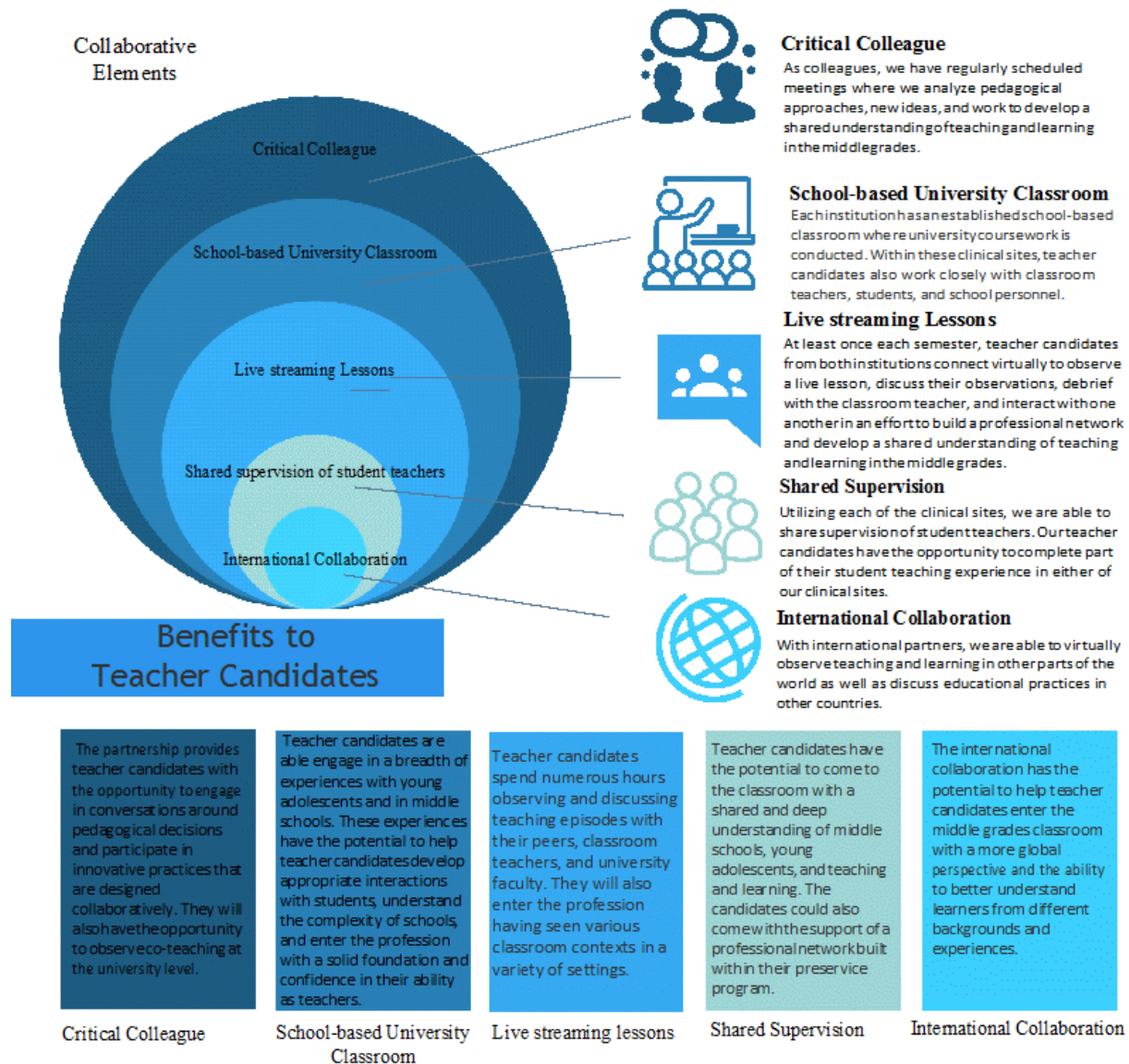


Figure 1. Cross-Institutional Partnership

and discuss live teaching episodes at multiple points in their programs. Utilizing an online meeting tool, the help of a graduate assistant, and a willing classroom teacher, we broadcast a live teaching episode from a classroom in the school, to the university classrooms. While the candidates are viewing the teaching episode, they are engaged in backchannel conversations with each other about their observations. After the lesson, the classroom teacher comes to the university classroom to debrief with the teacher candidates by answering questions and providing insight about the instructional choices of the lesson. The livestreaming of lessons provides our candidates opportunities to collaboratively view different classrooms settings, experience different teaching styles, see various educational contexts, and participate in live conversations while a lesson is occurring with us, their instructors, and with their peers from both institutions.

### **Shared Supervision**

As critical colleagues to one another, we also work to provide supervision of teacher candidates when the opportunity arises. Given that our institutions are located within 90 miles of each other, we have piloted teacher candidates completing part of their student teaching experience in the other's clinical site. Sharing supervision further develops our collective understanding of teaching and learning as we engage in the assessment of each other's teacher candidates. Further, it provides our candidates with an additional "outside" perspective and mentor as they grow into veteran teachers.

### **International Collaboration**

Building on our experiences with livestreaming lessons into our classrooms from our clinical sites, we have developed international partnerships where we are able to livestream lessons from other countries, including Spain and Sweden. While both institutions offer opportunities for overseas teaching experiences, UK provides direct university supervision for teacher candidates completing extended student teaching experiences abroad. We have begun using these occasions to broadcast teaching episodes back to the school-based university classroom where our candidates then engage in conversations about education in other countries. The partnership has provided a means for our teacher candidates to "see" into

classrooms in other countries, and talk with teachers there. This adds to their global understanding of teaching and learning, giving them a better understanding for students in our classrooms who may be coming from international settings.

### **Benefits to Our Middle Level Education Candidates**

From our perspective, we view the layers of our partnership as a means to improve and enhance the educational experiences of young adolescents in our state through preparation of our teacher candidates. First, we seek to prepare a cadre of teacher candidates from our institutions that will enact developmentally responsive pedagogy, advocate for appropriate organizational structures within their middle schools, and grow into veteran professionals willing and able to be instructional leaders. We work to do this by drawing on each other's expertise as critical colleagues and utilizing our clinical sites to bolster the opportunities for teacher candidate learning. We attempt to develop collaborative, innovative practices that will help our candidates develop the aforementioned traits. If our candidates can exhibit these traits, the educational experiences of the young adolescents in their classrooms may be enhanced and improved.

Second, in an effort to enact our universities' missions, the decisions we make for our candidates are also made through the lens of the clinical sites in which we both are based. Having candidates in classrooms across the school buildings on a regular basis provides teachers with an extra set of eyes and ears in the classroom. As class sizes increase across our state, having another adult during a lesson provides young adolescents with an added layer of support in the classroom. On a regular basis, classroom teachers ask teacher candidates to work with small groups of students who need extra support. These small group teaching situations are helpful to the teacher, the teacher candidate, and provide the individual attention some students need. Candidates in classrooms also provide many opportunities for young adolescents to build relationships with adults who understand them and are willing to support them.

Third, using the livestreaming lessons within our clinical sites, we create virtual spaces where candidates from both institutions engage in

dialogue about a teaching episode, their views of certain practices, their beliefs about teaching and learning, and a variety of other topics. Additionally, the collaborative lessons allow our teacher candidates to reflect *with* a classroom teacher immediately following the lesson. These professional conversations mimic professional learning communities that could someday be across a table instead of across the state. The partnership between the universities gives the teacher candidates the opportunity to see themselves as part of a larger network of teachers making a difference in the lives of students, and provides a model of authentic co-teaching, something the teacher candidates will need to do in their own classrooms. Often candidates have seen very little collaboration or co-teaching between teachers or faculty members in their educational career. This model provides an example that they can use in developing their own collaboration with other teachers.

Fourth, when the opportunity arises, we are able to share supervision of student teachers for each other's programs providing teacher candidates with a different professional perspective of his or her teaching. This is critical in a number of ways for both the teacher candidate and us, as teacher educators. If we truly are developing a shared understanding of effective teaching practices in middle grades classrooms, then an assessment of a teacher candidate's teaching becomes a way to negotiate that understanding further. Teacher candidates appreciate the varied perspectives to their teaching as it helps them grow professionally.

Finally, for our teacher candidates, the livestreaming of lessons from around the world affords opportunities for them to see different classroom contexts and educational settings. This kind of experience has the potential to broaden their world view and move them to be more aware of alternate viewpoints. This is invaluable to their future teaching as it helps them within their own classrooms to consider a global perspective as they plan for, teach, and assess their students. Further, these types of learning opportunities have the potential to support teacher candidates' abilities to better understand and support students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

### **Mentoring Across a Continuum of Professional Practice**

Through the benefits of this partnership, we have realized that we have the opportunity to mentor candidates across a continuum of professional practice. Because our candidates end up teaching within our geographic region after having completed their preservice preparation at one of our institutions, we are able to continue mentoring them through their early career, and ultimately placing practicum and student teachers from our programs in their classrooms. One recent candidate attended UK and participated in the middle level program there. She completed part of her student teaching internationally, and while abroad participated in video-recorded discussions and observations of her practice with candidates from both institutions. Upon her return to the US, she completed a portion of her final student teaching experience at the UL clinical site and was ultimately hired there after graduation. During her first year of teaching she participated in livestreaming opportunities and is currently co-teaching with a graduate from the UL program. Because the UL program is fully embedded in their clinical site *and* they are working in collaboration with UK, we are able to provide support for her and many of our graduates from preservice through early career teaching. This situation exemplifies one of the many ways the partnership between the two institutions benefits our candidates *and* our graduates as we work to build a strong cadre of middle level teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This essay described the elements of the collaborative partnership between programs at our two universities and the benefits we perceive to ourselves, our teacher candidates and ultimately to our graduates. We have focused on the positives in the partnership intentionally; it is rare to share teacher candidates, coursework and experiences between institutions. However, there have occasionally been challenges in some of the aspects of our collaboration. We have found that technology issues can be a problem. Internet in a large public school district is not always reliable. There have been times when the internet was completely down for part or all of the day. Additionally, the amount of bandwidth a public school has coupled with increasing numbers of users may mean that even if the internet is available, it may be very slow. We

have also found that scheduling our collaborative activities has required effort and flexibility. For example, when scheduling livestreaming from international school sites, aligning our University students' availability to class being taught overseas in another time zone has taken some manipulating. Scheduling our classes to meet at the same time, and observe a teacher teaching in another classroom at an embedded school site has also required discussion and planning far in advance of the actual date of the event. Also, we have both taken on the challenge of meeting with department chairs one or two semesters beforehand to ensure our classes align on the same days and within an acceptable timeframe. Finally, given that we represent the two largest universities in our state, students at both our institutions have a strong sense of school pride. While we have tried to prepare our students to work together professionally when they interact online, institutional rivalry can be very real and occasionally derail some discussions, particularly during sporting events that include both teams. We have found that there is a delicate balance between school pride and institutional rivalry, which could be challenging to faculty looking to engage in this type of collaboration.

As middle level educators focused on efforts to collaborate with one another to improve our practice, we have worked to provide partnerships and networks for our teacher candidates, schools, and universities to make a difference in the education of young adolescents. On a number of occasions, we have been asked about the costs associated with our partnership or what resources are needed for this type of collaboration. As we consider our work over the past three years, we realize the most valuable resource was time. Time to discuss programs, time to tinker with innovative ideas, time to process the experiences, and time to explore and investigate new approaches and technologies. All of the components of our partnership developed out of time we spent in discussions about effective practices and not out of financial resources provided by our institutions. In addition to having a strong, critical, and collaborative relationship with one another, this type of collaboration has been successful due in large part to the advances of technology and open access to many online tools. With the use of technology, we have been able to erase the geographic distance between our institutions and build a network of middle grades teachers

who share common goals and aspirations for young adolescents in our state.

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