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Teacher Candidates' Learning Gains: The Tale of Two Co-Teachers

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Abstract

Co-teaching during the student teaching experience has been given increased attention among researchers and teacher educators. Co-teaching facilitates an apprenticeship arrangement that encourages modeling of classroom practice for the candidate and provides a chance to implement directly what is being learned. This qualitative study explored teacher candidates' learning gains using the co-teaching model for student teaching. Teacher candidates were able to see more clearly the dynamics of how a classroom works and the process by which teachers plan lessons, implement curriculum, and manage the many duties of a classroom teacher.

Background

Co-teaching during the student teaching experience has been given increased attention among researchers and teacher educators (Bacharach, Heck, & Dank, 2003; Heck, Bacharach, Ofstedal, Mann, Wellik, & Dahlberg, 2006; Perl, Maughmer, & McQueen, 1999). As student teaching placements become more difficult for teacher preparation programs to secure due to federal mandates such as pressures of meeting test scores, the co-teaching model provides a rich alternative to the traditional model of handing over the classroom and student learning entirely to a student teacher. Co-teaching is defined as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space" (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 14). Others have extended this definition to emphasize that co-teaching is "a collaborative relationship for the purpose of shared work...for the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone" (Wenzlaff, Berak, Wiesemean, Monroe-Baillargeon, Bacharach, & Bradfield-Kreider, 2002, p. 14). A co-teaching model for student teaching allows the cooperating teacher to maintain the primary responsibilities for the classroom, while providing the teacher candidate with initial responsibilities such as monitoring individual work time or teaching a small group of students.

The difference between this approach and a traditional model is that the teacher candidate is integrated into the classroom from the beginning as a teacher versus a student observer. Thus,

the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate collaboratively plan and deliver instruction from the beginning. Teacher candidates are able to see more clearly the dynamics of how a classroom works and the process by which teachers plan lessons and implement curriculum. Ultimately, the teacher candidate and cooperating teacher alternate between assisting and/or leading in the planning, instruction, and assessment.

Theoretical Framework

Situated cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) has been the hallmark of teacher preparation's orientation of theory into practice. How can we help teacher candidates learn about teaching in environments in which they will authentically use their new knowledge? Cognitive apprenticeship tries "to enculturate [candidates] into authentic practices through activity and social interaction in a way similar to that evident ... in craft apprenticeship" (p. 37). Co-teaching facilitates an apprenticeship arrangement that encourages modeling of classroom practice for the candidate, and is accompanied by a chance to implement directly what is being learned. Less well investigated, however, is the candidate's socialization into teaching practice.

What is co-teaching?

In the co-teaching model a cooperating teacher and teacher candidate simultaneously have responsibility for a common group of learners. These two adults collaborate in planning, teaching, and assessing these students. Evidence indicates that learners do as well as, and often better than, similar students in single teacher classrooms when being taught in two-teacher environments (Castle, Arends, & Rockwood, 2008; Fisher, Frey, & Farnan, 2004).

Cooperating teachers and teacher candidates have seven co-teaching strategies to choose from when implementing the co-teaching model: one teach, one observe; one teach, one assist; station teaching; parallel teaching; supplemental teaching; alternative teaching; team teaching (Heck, Bacharach, Dahlberg, Ofstedal, Mann, Wellik, & Dank, 2010). The co-teachers plan lessons together with the seven strategies in mind and determine which strategies best fit the lesson objectives. These strategies allow for increased instructional options for P-12 students and help reduce the teacher-student ratio during instruction. Following lessons, co-teachers evaluate the lesson together in order to modify and adjust future co-taught lessons. The co-teaching model creates an opportunity for the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate to co-plan, co-teach, and co-evaluate.

Methodology and Methods

This study is part of a larger co-teaching study in which fifteen cooperating teachers and fifteen teacher candidates were trained on and implemented the co-teaching model for student teaching. For the purpose of this study, two in-depth case studies were completed with two teacher candidates to determine their own professional growth during the co-teaching program. The case study approach has been defined as an "empirical inquiry to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Further, the case study approach was utilized to "examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). A case study was employed to explore teacher candidates' professional development while using the co-teaching model for student teaching in one social context and the complexity and interrelatedness of multiple factors rooted in that context (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Stake, 1994).

Researcher

As a former elementary teacher, I often remember the days I could have used an extra set of hands, eyes, and ears, which seemed like every day. Moreover, collaborating daily with a colleague to exchange teaching ideas about one group of students did not take place. Now, as a teacher educator, I have supervised many teacher candidates who often want more cooperating teacher support and collaboration. Questions like: “Why are you using this activity?; How do I engage the students in the lesson?; and, What is the assessment process for this lesson?” are what teacher candidates want answered so that they can begin to understand the many moving parts that a classroom teacher orchestrates.

The old student teaching model of sink or swim where the cooperating teacher basically handed over the keys to the classroom is long gone. Instead, cooperating teachers are more present and supportive of teacher candidates during the student teaching experience, perhaps due to pressures such as test scores, but also perhaps to a dedication to help develop quality future educators. Thus, the co-teaching model is an excellent vehicle for teacher candidates and cooperating teachers to be very intentional about their conversations around planning, instruction, and assessment. Professional growth (cooperating teacher and teacher candidate) and improved P-12 student learning are a result of this collaboration.

My role in this co-teaching project was to serve as a co-trainer and lead evaluator of the model. I implemented the co-teaching model to a degree in the planning and implementation of the co-teaching trainings.

Participants and Context

The two teacher candidates who you will meet below were trained on and implemented the co-teaching model during student teaching—Ms. Betz and Mrs. O’Mara. Each attended all trainings and was observed a minimum of three times during a co-taught lesson.

Ms. Betz was an undergraduate student who was completing her student teaching in a kindergarten classroom that contained 20 students, 11 girls and nine boys. Three students had a first language other than English, and two of these students received English Language Learner (ELL) services. No students in this class had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or were in the process of being reviewed for eligibility. The socioeconomic status (SES) of the students in this classroom was primarily upper middle class, with the exception of four students. Five of the students were undergoing testing for Talented and Gifted (TAG). Spring Street Elementary, a K-5 school, had 425 students. The school’s students were 82.8% white, 7.1% multiple races, 6.8% Hispanic, and 2.4% Asian. During the year of this research, 0.7% of students were enrolled in ELL programs, 7.8% were eligible for special education services, and 14.8% were TAG. Fifteen percent of Spring Street Elementary students were on free or reduced priced lunch. The school did not receive Title I funds, and had been awarded the state of Oregon’s highest rating of “Exceptional” for five consecutive years with over 90% of students meeting and exceeding state standards in reading and mathematics.

Mrs. O’Mara, a graduate student working on her Master of Arts in Teaching, was completing her student teaching in a classroom in which the demographics were more diverse. This provided an opportunity to explore the co-teaching model in different classroom settings. There were 29 students in Mrs. O’Mara’s first grade classroom, 16 females and 13 males; 23 students identified as white, two students identified as African-American, two students identified as Hispanic, and two students identified as having multiple ethnicities. The school, Sunny Elementary, had 495

students, 37% of whom qualified for free or reduced lunch. Student ethnicity data showed that 74.4% of the population was White, 8.5% were of multiple races, 7.4% were Hispanic, 4.6% African American, 3.6% Asian, and 1.4% Native American. Of the 495 students, 15.5% qualified for Special Education, 3.2% were English Language Learners (ELL), and 11.1% were Talented and Gifted (TAG). All of Sunny's teachers met the federal definition of a highly qualified teacher.

Fieldwork and Interviews

A minimum of three formal observations in each of the co-teaching classrooms were completed during the teacher candidate's four month co-teaching experience. Classroom observations were guided by the following questions:

- What co-teaching strategies are frequently used?
- What is the purpose of each co-teacher's role (e.g. classroom management, instruction, academic help, other)?
- How do the students respond? Do they interact with both teachers?
- How has co-planning/reflecting contributed to professional growth?

The researcher recorded field notes of informal conversations and observations while in the field. After each observation, the cooperating teacher, teacher candidate, and researcher had a post-observation conference interview. Example questions for the post-conference interviews are: "How did co-planning impact this lesson?; How did the lesson go?; Were the students' needs met?; and, What would you change for next time you teach this lesson?" These post-conference interviews were intended to allow the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate to reflect on the co-teaching model and help guide their future planning, instruction, and assessment.

In addition to classroom observations, teacher candidates were asked to participate in focus group interviews at the end of their experience using a protocol that included questions about successes and struggles related to: working together using the co-teaching model; perceptions of effectiveness; and their sense of how well the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate collaboratively planned, instructed, and assessed student learning. In addition, teacher candidates were asked a series of questions to explore whether or not they believed they were now able to see more clearly the dynamics of how a classroom works and the process by which teachers plan lessons and implement curriculum and other issues related to professional development.

Data Analysis

After documenting the trainings, check-in interviews and meetings, observations, focus group responses, and/or personal anecdotes, the data analysis began (Maxwell, 1996). The teacher candidate interviews, observations, videos, and field notes were analyzed using a constant comparative qualitative assessment (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of dominant themes that emerged during the process. Constant comparison was used to chunk the data into meaning units. The chunks were coded by the researcher of the co-teaching program according to overarching commonalities illustrated in the data. Analysis of the data reported in this study was done using an iterative process of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial coding categories were collapsed into emergent themes such as co-planning, professional conversations and relationships, and classroom management.

Results: The Tale of Two Co-Teachers

In the following sections, Ms. Betz and Mrs. O'Mara speak from their own experiences when describing the ways in which they believe they grew professionally while using the co-teaching model during student teaching.

Ms. Betz

During my experience as a pre-service teacher in the co-teaching model, I have noted several learning gains I have made that are directly related to my responsibilities as a co-teacher and the expectations of my cooperating teacher. These gains are in the areas of collaboration, planning, instructional methods, and assessment.

Ms. Betz on Collaboration. Collaboration has been one of my areas for growth as a student teacher throughout my year of pre-service teaching, generally because of a lack of confidence and a lack of opportunity to build confidence. In my previous placements, I felt more of a student than a teacher because I was not given nearly the level of responsibility I have in my current placement. Entering into a co-teaching relationship with my current cooperating teacher gave me the experience I needed to become a successful collaborator with other teachers, parents, and administrators. Coming into the classroom as a co-teacher, something my cooperating teacher has made a priority, has made me feel more respected in the eyes of other teachers, which has allowed me to learn to collaborate with them in the ways I will need to when I am a licensed teacher. The position of co-teacher has also led the parents in our classroom to treat me like a second teacher, rather than a student teacher, and this allows me to learn about managing parent volunteers, handling parent concerns, and having daily conversations with parents about a variety of topics. This is a contrast from my previous placements in which I had less of an opportunity to perform these tasks. An advantage of the co-teaching model is certainly learning to effectively and professionally collaborate, beginning with your co-teacher and expanding that knowledge to other teachers, parents, and administrators.

Ms. Betz on Planning. My learning gains in collaboration began with the process of co-planning that my cooperating teacher and I made a priority from the first week of my placement. Learning to plan in this way has given me tools it would have taken years to develop on my own. My co-teacher was able to show me how she plans her instruction while allowing me to make decisions as well, eventually leading into a gradual release of responsibility that I am confident will make me a better first-year teacher than I would have been without this initial support. Together, we created a weekly schedule outline that included specials, literacy blocks, writing workshops, math and science rotations, thematic work, and other daily or weekly events. We then used this schedule to write in our daily lessons as well as plan long-term units together. During our co-planning time I was able to learn about what goes into creating whole units and individual lessons, including long-term curriculum plans, making decisions based on assessment data, and arranging for multiple modes of instruction in order to reach as many learners as possible. Learning about how to plan instruction in the co-teaching model is an advantage that I know will make me a stronger teacher in my first year of teaching.

Ms. Betz on Instructional Methods and Assessment. As a teacher candidate, two areas I wanted to learn about most were instructional methods and assessment. Of course, these two areas are addressed whether you are in a co-teaching model or not, but there are important reasons why I believe that the co-teaching model has allowed me to make greater learning gains than I would have otherwise. As in planning, the gradual release of responsibility that the co-

teaching model allows was one of the main advantages of co-teaching. In units I create, I try to include a gradual release of responsibility because I see that providing modeling, supported work time, and independent work time for my students allows them to have confidence in their abilities and improve their knowledge and skills while remaining in the zone of proximal development. I see this working just as well in my own learning about teaching. My cooperating teacher has given me opportunities to observe her teaching, during which time I am able to notice particular strategies and instructional methods that I would like to try. Then, I am given the opportunity to practice these strategies in a safe environment, using co-teaching strategies that provide just enough support while still allowing me to learn. Finally, there are times when I am teaching by myself or we are using the “one teach, one observe” or “one teach, one assist” model and I have the freedom to implement strategies I have learned from my cooperating teacher and try new ideas as well. This model has benefitted me not only in learning and practicing instructional strategies, but also in the area of assessment. I have been able to observe my cooperating teacher perform assessments and use the data, designed and implemented assessments with my cooperating teacher, and created my own assessment for my work sample and other lessons and units.

Co-teaching for the entire four months of my advanced student teaching placement as opposed to 7 weeks of solo teaching has allowed me to teach more—nearly every lesson of every day—and this has definitely led to increased learning gains. The mentality of co-teaching has led to my direct involvement in planning curriculum, implementing instruction, performing assessments, and analyzing the data to make decisions about future curriculum and instructional methods. This experience has played a crucial role in my development as a future teacher and I will be a stronger teacher because I was a part of this program. I feel lucky to have been placed with a cooperating teacher who has made me a true co-teacher and allowed me to learn from her as well as learn on my own. That is the advantage of good co-teaching: support and guidance in an environment of high expectations and responsibility.

Mrs. O'Mara

Co-teaching has been an experience that I wish was fiscally feasible in all classrooms. The benefits of having two teachers in the classroom are immense. It has been my only experience as a teacher candidate, so I cannot reflect on how this experience is different from traditional teacher preparatory programs, however my experience has been one in which I have learned valuable knowledge in which to build my own classroom and prepare me for a career in education.

Mrs. O'Mara on Collaboration and Communication. The co-teaching model was presented to me during an informational meeting with other teacher candidates who were participating in the co-teaching program. This meeting allowed the teacher candidates to have their questions answered and to get a better understanding of the format. This meeting was followed up with an introduction meeting with our cooperating teachers. During this meeting we were allowed to get to know each other better by playing interactive games and begin the relationship building process. This meeting also gave us a format to ask each other questions about our working environment and how we each perceived the process. Both of these meetings gave me a better understanding of how the process would work and allowed me to form a connection with my cooperating teacher. This proved to be integral in our relationship.

As I have worked with and alongside my cooperating teacher, I have found that the path that she took me on was one in which I came into the classroom as an observer, transitioned to assistant, proceeded to co-teach utilizing many strategies, solo teaching for a short period of time,

and then started the transition back to co-teaching, assistant, and then observer. In each stage of the development, I was able to support and be supported.

As a guest in the cooperating teacher's classroom, I was able to observe with the purpose of taking notes of existing classroom management techniques and observe learners' needs. As I transitioned to being an assistant, I was then able to work with individual students and make strong relationships to build the learning environment. During this initial time, my cooperating teacher ensured that I was introduced to the personnel of the school and I was able to take part in building and grade-level meetings. The period of observation and assistance lasted two weeks.

As most teacher candidates have related to me, one of the most difficult parts of pre-service experience is building a trusting relationship with your cooperating teacher. My cooperating teacher was absent for one week and during this time I was able to establish relationships and classroom expectations with the students. I truly became comfortable within the classroom, and upon her return I was able to have more confidence in my abilities and to bring my knowledge and successful experiences to our co-teaching relationship. In addition, she was able to see that I could be trusted to make good decisions regarding our classroom and to ensure learning was taking place. Co-teaching relationships have to build on trust and this experience helped both of us to gain trust and respect in each other.

As we transitioned to the true co-teaching model, I found that I was guided to increase my organizational skills to facilitate better communication. Communication and a commitment to a time to plan have been essential in our relationship. This has forced me to organize my thoughts and preparedness and to better communicate the reasoning behind my curriculum choices. This process has made me a better educator.

Mrs. O'Mara on Co-planning and Co-reflecting. We have utilized our weekly, formal planning meetings to plan our lessons and address which co-teaching strategy would be most useful and productive. We have employed multiple co-teaching strategies and each strategy has helped me to become a well-rounded educator. We have used the one teach, one observe strategy when we need to evaluate and observe specific behavior to form further lessons. This technique has taught me to focus on specific behaviors and then adjust teaching methods to serve all students. The one teach- one assist strategy has been advantageous to us in that we are able to plan a lesson with specific learning targets, have one teacher lead while the other can assist individual students. Supplemental teaching has been essential in our classroom. We have been able to differentiate lessons to address individual needs, thus educating all students and meeting them at their level. Team teaching has been utilized to model specific behaviors and demonstrates what is expected of the learners. This was especially useful when we were teaching our 30 first graders how to work in pairs and small groups.

In addition to our meetings, I also have utilized the observations and feedback from my education professors and university supervisor to further adjust my teaching methods. Their insights have allowed me to enhance my teaching techniques and to ensure that all students' needs are being met. Reading and discussing their observations have provided me a solid foundation in which to build by knowledge on classroom management techniques, developing critical thinking skills, and addressing the needs of my students.

The co-teaching model, from my perspective, is one in which I am still a guest in the cooperating teacher's classroom. However, having two teachers who respect, trust, and work well together benefits all of the learners in class. Co-teaching has strengthened my collaboration skills, taught me valuable, essential teaching techniques, and enabled me to not only receive feedback

and advice from one or two professionals, but multiple teachers, thus building a strong foundation for my educational career.

Conclusions

A co-teaching approach to student teaching provides two professionally trained adults in a classroom to instruct and manage the needs of the P-12 learners. Co-teaching creates a professional collaboration that allows teacher candidates to understand better the myriad number of responsibilities that classroom teachers have. For example, professional conversations and relationships with colleagues are key to helping new teachers feel supported as they enter the teaching profession. Although it is often neglected in teacher preparation, how to work effectively with adults is a vital responsibility of a teacher. Often new teachers do not have many opportunities to learn to effectively collaborate with teachers and other adults in their school buildings (i.e. paraprofessionals, parents, and staff). Learning to manage children is one step in becoming an effective teacher while learning to collaborate and work productively with adults is another. Thus, one benefit of the co-teaching model is that it better prepares teacher candidates for collaborative work with other professionals. Co-teaching during student teaching professionalizes their relationship (Heck, et al., 2010).

In addition, teachers are concerned that without a solid classroom management foundation, instructional minutes will be spent on behavior problems rather than academics, and student discipline problems are a main reason teachers leave the profession. The specific details that ensure a classroom is running smoothly and efficiently are often labeled as “it is just a good group of students.” It often appears in these classrooms that there are no classroom management issues. The intentional steps a teacher takes to set up and manage his or her classroom are what go unnoticed. In a co-teaching model during student teaching, the deliberate, scheduled, and purposeful conversations allow teachers to make the “invisible visible” to teacher candidates (Heck et al., p. 15). Teacher candidates in this study said that using the co-teaching model helped them to become more attentive to classroom management issues and each student’s learning needs. The model also facilitated an enhanced ability to read the cooperating teacher’s and students’ nonverbal cues and modify teaching behaviors, as needed. Teacher candidates believed they were better able to grasp the workings of a classroom by using the co-teaching strategies. Co-teaching facilitated an apprenticeship arrangement that encouraged modeling of classroom practice for the candidate, a chance to implement directly what is being learned in the field and the classroom, and the socialization into teaching practice. Thus, school districts and teacher preparation programs should work in partnership to prepare quality teachers and improve P-12 student experiences.

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