

What Cannot Be Taught In a Classroom for Pre-Service Teachers: Cooperating Teachers Fill the Gap

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Abstract

Teacher education programs face several common areas of concern for beginning teachers that include struggles with classroom management, organization, curricular and pedagogy concerns, self-efficacy, commitment to the profession, and leadership. Successful student teaching experiences are the key factor in developing future teachers, increasing student success, and keeping effective teachers in the classroom. The teaching profession is often associated with a high level of attrition in beginning teachers. School systems world-wide are faced with high turnover, which negatively impacts student learning. This paper discusses the research explored in a case study regarding cooperating teachers, their impact on self-efficacy, and the key characteristics of cooperating teachers that predict successful student teaching experiences. The study incorporated a Likert scale survey, open-ended surveys, observations, and information-gathering interviews; allowing the researcher to gain insight about student teaching experiences. The information gathered will enable others to modify teacher education programs and pre-service experiences leading to more successful initial teaching experiences.

1. Introduction

In the development of today's educator, strategic and intentional instruction is essential for successful teacher preparation programs. Effective teachers are the cornerstone to improvement processes in modern educational systems. Recently, the importance of improving the pre-service teaching experience has been brought to the forefront due to high attrition rates of teachers within their first five years of teaching. Educational institutions face challenges at all levels with high turnover, and in turn, this has a negative impact on student learning. A pre-service teacher's student teaching experience can have a positive or a negative impact on teacher attrition (Rots & Aelterman, 2008), depending on preparation before and support during the experience. Teacher education programs are faced with the challenge of providing a seamless transition from the college classroom into student teaching and then to full-time teaching. There are many educational dynamics that can impact the student teaching experience. These dynamics include, but are not limited to, the relationship with the cooperating teacher as well as the student's own self-efficacy. The purpose of this research is to discuss the impact of the cooperating teacher on a student teacher's learning and their future success as a teacher. Furthermore, the research addresses the importance of self-efficacy and providing an environment that allows for growth and learning.

Review of available research regarding student teaching, indicates that most programs effectively prepare teacher candidates with content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and provide experiences to demonstrate their learning in classrooms, however there are some components that are amiss. Bigham, Hively, & Toole (2014) stated the importance of clinical practice within the teacher preparation program to develop pre-service teachers with the assistance of cooperating teachers who supervise and mentor.

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Clinical practice allows opportunities to experience scenarios and situations that are difficult to teach with a textbook alone. Fostering a mentoring relationship between a student teacher and the cooperating teacher is a key element of success.

This study sought to understand the perceptions of students participating in a 14-week student teaching experience. The research explored the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher. This paper will focus on the student's perception of their experiences, key characteristics of an effective cooperating teacher, as well as the importance of fostering an environment for valuable field experience and the development of a positive self-efficacy.

Literature Review (1 page)

The event that culminates the student's college learning and prepares them to manage their own classroom is the student teaching experience. Student teaching offers an authentic learning opportunity, much like an apprenticeship or on-the-job training in other disciplines. The literature provides us with research and theory that supports authentic learning experiences such as fieldwork and student teaching. The research suggests characteristics that help predict success in the student's experience. The research recommends key elements including well-established field experiences and a positive self-efficacy in teaching. Focusing on these key elements can aid teacher preparation programs in developing a road map for successful student teaching experiences. These characteristics provide students the tools needed to persist in their future teaching roles.

The most important aspects include a positive experience in the classroom and the strong relationship with the cooperating teacher. There is a link between experience and teaching effectiveness (Rockoff, et al., 2011). Student teachers are more effective after practicing their foundation and pedagogical knowledge in field placements, conducted under structured supervision (Wilson et al., 2001). Programs must acknowledge the importance of expert teacher mentors to provide this success. Practicing the skill of teaching in the classroom is the most important factor in preparation due to the ability to practice in the real world (Rots & Aelterman, 2008). The mentor teachers, in the field, are an important element of the teacher preparation program. Bigham et al. (2014) described the cooperating teacher as one who has experience, expertise, and commitment as gatekeepers to the profession. Rots and Aelterman found pre-service teachers who received more mentor support were more efficient and better prepared for classroom and teaching responsibilities.

Greenberg, Pomerance, & Walsch,(2011) described the cooperating teachers role as understudied but valuable and important. In addition, they found that student achievement was improved for first-year teachers from institutions that required mandatory student teaching placement, selected the cooperating teacher as opposed to allowing the school system or student to select that teacher, and met the following requirements:

- 1) A minimum of three years of teaching experience for cooperating teachers,
- 2) A minimum of five classroom observations by a supervisor, and
- 3) A capstone project, at the conclusion of student teaching (Student teaching in the United States, p.7).

Therefore, it is important to understand the qualities that predict the effectiveness of a cooperating teacher.

As pre-service teachers acquire new knowledge and make meaning of their experiences it is important to have a cooperating teacher who facilitates learning in an authentic setting. Prior teaching experiences offer the opportunity to link theory to practice. An effective cooperating teacher facilitates these experiences to assure optimal growth of the student teacher. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2011) stated teacher candidates in field placements are better able to bridge their conceptual knowledge with practice along with discussions, readings, and reflections. Connecting theory to practice before a teacher assumes responsibility of a classroom is paramount in teaching success. These connections are critical and can be easily developed through an effective cooperating teacher, hence creating a successful new teacher.

In addition to effective mentors, it is known that well-established field experiences and student teaching experiences for pre-service teachers are essential elements that assist in the prevention of teacher dropout in the first few years. Retention of teachers is vital to a successful education system; however the research suggests retention issues exist.

The teaching profession is often associated with a high level of attrition (Sass, Bustos Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2008). A concerning number, 40-50%, of beginning teachers leave the profession (Mee & Haverback, 2014) within the first five years of teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Moreover, teacher education programs that value the importance of encouraging students to learn and believe the role of the cooperating teacher is key to pre-service teachers' success are more likely to provide an environment that allows for error and growth. It has been stated that a cooperating teacher has essential elements that allow for pre-service teacher growth. A successful student teaching experience allows the pre-service teacher to feel success and maintain the positive self-efficacy needed to succeed in the field. Pre-service teachers need more than content and pedagogical knowledge in preparation for assuming responsibility for all aspects of a classroom.

"The experience of early success and satisfaction during student teaching may be crucial. Therefore, findings suggest that initial teacher education can have a meaningful impact on graduates' retention in the teaching profession through the reinforcement and encouragement of teaching commitment" (Rots & Aelterman, 2008, p. 523). There is a movement toward providing more than pedagogical knowledge followed by the clinical practice of student teaching under supervision (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). If programs offer a student teaching experience in an environment that allows for the pre-service teacher to learn from errors and improve (hence improving self-efficacy), there is a higher chance of success.

Sample

The survey population consisted of 41 student teachers at a private liberal arts college who either were finishing their student teaching experience or had finished it the previous term. The criterion for the case study was enrollment in a student teaching experience during the 2014-15 academic year. All students who were student teaching during the fall and winter terms at the college received an invitation to participate in the study. Given the established rapport built in the classroom experience, a large percentage of students participated and the researcher received cooperation from the majority of the students. Thirty-two of the forty-one student teachers responded to the survey resulting in a 78% response rate.

Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized in this study. The data collection included a Likert scale survey, open-ended survey, faculty observation in an authentic setting, and informal interviews. One year of qualitative data was collected allowing the researcher to determine themes. Using an embedded design in the case study resulted in a deeper understanding of the student teacher experience. The purpose of this study is to identify attributes of successful student teacher characteristics and improve the teacher candidate preparation by identifying additional programmatic opportunities and preparation. An open-ended survey added to the rich data regarding the cooperating teacher and pre-service teacher's relations. The survey population consisted of 41 student teachers at Wartburg College who were finishing their student teaching experience or had finished the previous term. The criterion for the case study was enrollment in a student teaching experience during the 2014-15 academic year. All students who were student teaching during the fall and winter terms at Wartburg College received an invitation to participate in the study. Given the established rapport built from the classroom experience, a large percentage of students participated and the researcher received cooperation from the majority of the students.

In this study, administrative data was collected on the number of hours each participant logged for course requirements in field placements. The total number for field placement hours prior to the student teaching experience differs for each participant, ranging from 84 to 100 hours. The hours varied due to degree requirements for elementary and secondary positions along with the number of required endorsements obtained with field placements. The researcher collected data throughout a year of questionnaires, using the Likert scales collected by the researcher, interviews, and observation. Bracketing established themes in the data.

Results

What cannot be taught in a classroom can often be taught in the student teaching experience. The in-depth data gathered in this study gave the researcher the opportunity to gain insight in the student teaching experience. Collection of open-ended surveys transpired in the winter of 2015. Students received two surveys in an on-line format through their college e-mail. The survey contained 15 open-ended questions. The researcher retained questions after sorting by relevant themes to obtain the results.

Study participants responded to a series of questions in relating to their student teaching experience. The questions included motivation or desire to student teach, difficulty or ease of the experience, open reflection on each of the seven week placements, events that were surprising, resources that were helpful, and areas needing more preparation. Participants also responded to what areas they felt best-prepared in their student teaching experience. Although all elements played an important role of the student teacher's success, the cooperating teacher comments continued to rise to the top of the list when measuring success or lack thereof. The results of this study found successful student teaching experiences included a positive relationship between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher. Furthermore, opportunities to develop or maintain an effective self-efficacy fostered the growth of the pre-service teacher. Students reported success based on communication, immersion with their cooperating teacher, school community, and support from their higher education experience. The pre-service teachers were given opportunities to express concerns, successes, and offer solutions. The results offer teacher preparation programs the opportunity to discover characteristics that are important to consider when selecting cooperating teachers. What follows are the results from the survey questions related to influential characteristics of cooperating teachers.

Initially an important characteristic that emerged from the data was the importance of effective communication skills. It was found that eighty-six percent of the respondents, in this study, felt prepared to be able to effectively communicate with the cooperating teacher. One participant stated, "I was always prepared to effectively communicate with those that I thought would appreciate my input. I was very honest and open with those that were the same to me, and I felt like I created many amazing relationships during this experience because of it". Another respondent commented, "Student teaching is the time when it comes to you being able to translate theory into practice, so it really comes down to your ability to make this transition happen. For me, I was lucky and able to do this. I also had good cooperating teachers whom I could model myself after; so learning about the know-how of classroom communication went well". A respondent who did not feel as positive about communication with the cooperating teacher remarked, "Communication about disagreements in philosophy and lesson planning were two conversations in which I was less prepared".

Immersion was the second theme that was delineated from the data. Seventy percent of pre-service teachers experienced a positive immersion with cooperating teachers. The experiences most commonly explicated included the cooperating teacher acting as a mentor (61%), being supportive (48%), assisting in the transition through co-teaching and collaboration (26%), and providing resources (22%). Students unequivocally described cooperating teachers as a mentor through role modeling, giving feedback, guiding, encouraging, and challenging. A participant commented, "I learned more from the cooperating teacher in seven weeks than I learned in three years at [my institution]. This says nothing about [my institution], but rather the intense and incredible experience I had with her."

Other support systems are present during student teaching experiences beyond the experience with the cooperating teacher. The two largest groups mentioned by participants included the school community and the higher education institution. Thirty percent of participants commented on support from the building, principal, superintendent, counselors, and other teachers within their building. Twenty-six participants included professors, supervising teachers, seminars, and peers as their support system.

Although several positive characteristics emerged, it was also important to observe the areas of concerns. In this research, seventeen percent specified problematic areas with cooperating teachers. Those concerns included difficulty in communication and an unwillingness to release control of the classroom to the student teacher throughout the experience. One participant remarked, "My supervising teacher kept a lot of control of the lessons, so I was never required to create my own lessons". In addition to the importance of the role of the cooperating teacher, it was also proven that the cooperating teacher needed to create an environment that allowed the student teacher to foster a positive self-efficacy. Literature often refers to self-efficacy as a predictor of teacher effectiveness. Self-efficacy is self-awareness and the educator's belief in one's value in the profession (Rockoff et al., 2011). Participants reflected on self-efficacy at a surface level. Pre-service teachers described confidence levels at the start of the student teaching experience with 52% stating that confidence was lacking at the start of the experience. One pre-service teacher stated, "My second placement was definitely much more challenging than the first. It was more difficult to communicate with my cooperating teacher, tougher to build relationships with the students, and curriculum that was much different than I had taught before".

While approximately half of the participants noted they lacked confidence going in, 26% commented they felt ready for the experience. One participant mentioned, "I felt very prepared; I had the knowledge, and student teaching has provided the practice". Another respondent stated, "I think the education courses I have taken have give me both breadth and depth of knowledge about education, classroom management and working with other educators/parents". A cooperating teacher that provided a positive classroom environment that encouraged learning received higher ratings. Pre-service teachers commented that in this setting they felt more comfortable and were able to learn from their mistakes. Overall our research supports the concept that cooperating teachers play a vital role in student teaching success. Elements of a successful student teacher included their ability to effectively communicate as well as working with cooperating teachers who were able to give up control of the classroom and allow the student teacher to lead. In this study, the relationship between the cooperating teacher and pre-service teacher was a positive component in the success of student teachers and their self-efficacy. The study found pre-service teachers who have highly effective cooperating teachers report a more positive experience and feel positive about the transition from student teaching to teaching and effectively managing their own classroom.

Overall the findings suggest the key to successful student teaching is identifying a cooperating teacher that provides an environment that allows for the student to feel safe in exploring their own teaching. In addition, they must be able to communicate effectively, be capable of releasing control of the classroom, and encourage growth through constructive feedback. The results allow teacher preparation programs an avenue with guidelines when searching for effective cooperating teachers. Additionally, the research offers teacher preparation programs substantial data that supports the important role of the cooperating teachers. Lastly, more research is needed in the area of successful teacher preparation programs and effective pre-service experiences that will retain teachers past the early years of their teaching careers. Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) professed there is a need for more research in all areas of teacher preparation. Additional research is needed on the student teaching experience and cooperating teacher's role. "Very little of the research on student teaching addresses this fundamental question: What features of the experience will make a teacher more effective" (Greenberg, J., Poereance, L., & Walsch, K., 2011, p. 6). Therefore, it is important to continue to study the cooperating teacher's impact along with the long term effects it has on pre-service teacher's carrier in education.

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