

Chapter 37

Perceptions of Teacher Candidates' Experiences in Paired Placements: Perceptions of Paired Placements

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry described the nature of paired placements within a revolutionary new teacher education program designed to prepare undergraduate teacher education candidates for employment in inclusive early childhood learning environments. The focus of this project, reflecting a Vygotskian lens, has emerged into a five-fold examination: to document the ways that pairs work together, to articulate the outcomes of pairings as contrasted with single arrangements, to identify the practices that make pairings successful or not, to examine the practice of pairing students from the mentor teachers' perspective, and to explore how collaboration between student teachers and mentor teachers lead to critical reflection about teaching. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with teacher candidates and cooperating mentors and teachers, observations and field notes. The site for this study was a university-based early childhood center.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines a new initiative in integrated early childhood teacher education. Historically, field placements have evolved around a typical pattern of pairing a teacher candidate with one cooperating mentor teacher. Sorensen (2014)

explains, “the most common practice has been to place a single student in a given subject area with a single ‘cooperating teacher’ or ‘mentor teacher’” during field experiences for teacher candidates. Further, Baeten and Simons (2014) explain that, “traditionally, field experiences in teacher education have been characterized by

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9634-1.ch037

student teachers observing lessons before receiving the responsibility to teach individually” (p. 92). Gardiner and Robinson (2009) explain that utilizing the typical single placement approach “maintains the status quo rather than helps the teacher candidates reconstruct their understandings of teaching as a collaborative endeavor placing students at the center of learning” (p. 81). In the current study, two teacher candidates (also known as teacher candidate dyads) were paired with one cooperating mentor teacher. This initiative closely aligns with the co-teaching (Bacharach, N., Heck, T., Dahlberg, K., 2011, Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010, Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007) mandate that has been developed of late. Within this paper, synonyms for paired placements within a teaching experience are co-teaching, team teaching, partner teaching, cooperative teaching, and collaborative teaching (Baeten & Simons, 2014).

The collaborative features of co-teaching and paired placements have taken on increased importance in numerous fields and some major corporations. As Delisle (2014) explains, “the partnership for 21st Century skills, a National Organization with sponsors as diverse as Apple, Ford Motor Company, CISCO Systems, Crayola, and the National Education Association, have developed plans to synchronize the age old “three R’s” (reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic) of curriculum content with the following new “4 C’s” needed for 21st Century learners:

1. Critical thinking and problem solving,
2. Communication,
3. Collaboration, and
4. Creativity and innovation” (p. 17).

He further explains these skills should be coupled with global awareness, civic and environmental literacy so that learning may be maximized for all.

Co-teaching at the university level is popular as educators often utilize the various principles

of co-teaching as they support teams of students involved in collaborative projects. Through practice, collaboration and disposition skills are further developed and polished (Darling Hammond, 2005; Gardiner & Robinson, 2011; & Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Hanse, 2008). Sorensen (2014) suggests “sustained, collaborative approaches, embedded in contexts, involving peer support as well as that from a more experienced mentor or coach tend to be the most effective” (p. 129). Moreover, Aoki (2005) expresses the concept of teaching as more than a mode of doing, but like collaborative approaches, teaching is a mode of “being with others” (p. 359). Thus, at a higher academic level, researchers (e.g. Wilson & Bolster, 2011) have emphasized the importance of a culture of teacher collaboration to support change and newfound leadership. The models of collaboration suggested in literature (Bullough, Jr. R., Young, J., Erickson, L., Birrell, J., Clark, D., Egan, M., Berrie, C., Hales, V., & Smith, G., 2002; Nokes, J. D. Bullough, Jr. R., Egan, W., Birrell, J., & Hansen, J. M., 2008; Sorensen, 2014) connect most research on teacher education, and mentoring or co-teaching with a strong structure of socio-cultural perspective, with an emphasis on the importance of discourse in the promotion of learning (Vygotsky, 1987).

Baeten and Simons (2014) contend that during team – teaching, teacher candidates learn through participating and engaging in joint activity. By sharing ideas, providing alternative perspectives and receiving advice from each other as they discuss lesson planning and curricular issues, they negotiate meaning and learn from each other’s knowledge and skills. In this way, they achieve more than if they would work individually. “Moreover, during a team teaching activity, teachers operate in - what has been called by Vygotsky - each other’s zone of proximal development” (Baeten & Simons, 2014, p. 93). By collaborating with their peers or by receiving peer support, teachers can come to higher levels of performance in numerous different areas. What the teacher

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