Reimagining Partnerships: Using the Co-Teach Model to Prepare 21st Century Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the co-teaching model for the student teaching internship and its benefits for teacher candidates and the students with whom they work. The partnerships that have emerged from the implementation of co-teaching in eastern Washington state are explained. Co-teaching is in the process of being phased in by all four major universities in the region: Whitworth University, Washington State University, Eastern Washington University, and Gonzaga University. The universities and local districts partnered to form the Eastern Washington Co-teaching Leadership Team to plan and deliver training together. A study was conducted by the Eastern Washington Co-teaching Leadership Team in Spring of 2010 to determine mentor perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching for both students in the classroom and for teacher candidate training. The respondents supported co-teaching as an effective approach and offered recommendations for training mentors and teacher candidates more effectively in the future.

"Corey just threw a desk at me, and now I'm going into the bathroom to cry," I sobbed to the principal of the middle school where I was student teaching, as I dashed out of her office and into the bathroom, climbed onto the toilet seat and did just that. I had always known that I wanted to be a teacher, but my student teaching experience was changing my mind. It was nobody's fault, just the reality and the circumstances of the situation. My mentor teacher had emergency surgery, and the district did not have substitute teachers available. I was twenty-one and alone in the classroom with 43 eighth graders for the majority of my student teaching. I sometimes can't believe I made it out alive and am still in the profession today (J. Darragh, November 20, 2010).

Sink or Swim: Fostering Independence or Despair in the Traditional Student Teaching Model

While the experience above is definitely extreme, conversations with teachers often reveal similar student teaching stories of struggling to manage the complexities of the classroom environment. Regrettably, too often this "sink or swim" philosophy results in a negative experience for the teacher candidate, the mentor teacher and, most unfortunately, for the learners in the classroom.

Research shows that the best indicator for student academic achievement is the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that when attempting to implement a new teaching strategy, few teachers are able to do so without continuing assistance and collaboration. The most effective professional development programs offer, "30-100 hours spread out over 6-12 months" (Darling-Hammond &

Richardson, 2009, p. 49). This implies that ongoing support and mentoring leads to the effective implementation of teaching and management skills. However, following a "sink or swim" philosophy, mentors are often asked to leave the classroom and not be involved in any aspect of the learning experience, taking away the very structures a pre-service teacher needs to become an effective practitioner.

In addition to concerns with this traditional student teaching model for instruction, learning, and classroom management, further issues have emerged in finding quality mentor teachers and school placements for teacher candidates. In a high stakes testing environment, talented teachers and many school districts are often reluctant to offer their classrooms and leave their students due to the potential impact on student test scores and achievement. These concerns are valid. Research done by St. Cloud State University's College of Education in St. Cloud, Minnesota as a part of the Teacher Quality Enhancement project, found that students taught by teacher candidates in the traditional model do, in fact, perform lower than those taught by a professional teacher (St. Cloud State University College of Education, 2009).

It has become clear that the old model of student teaching needs to be rethought to provide support for teacher candidates and to foster student learning gains. The remainder of this paper will demonstrate how the co-teaching model for the student teaching internship addresses the needs of all involved in the classroom: mentor teacher, teacher candidate, and most importantly, the students.

Co-teaching: A Model to Prepare 21st Century Teacher Candidates

Co-teaching is defined as, "two teachers working together with groups of students and sharing the planning, organization, delivery and assessment of instruction as well as the physical space" (St. Cloud State University College of Education, 2010). In the co-teaching model, the teacher candidate and mentor teacher gradually shift the roles as primary teacher and planner, both remaining involved in all classroom activities throughout the internship. In doing so, both adults are utilized to assist student learning in a variety of ways.

The co-teaching model focuses on increased collaboration in planning and teaching throughout the student teaching internship and relies on two key components: specific co-teaching strategies and effective communication. The strategies associated with the co-teaching model were developed out of the special education field by Friend and Cook (1995). St. Cloud State University used the original co-teaching strategies outlined by Friend and Cook and modified them for the student teaching internship (St. Cloud State University College of Education, 2010). The seven strategies are defined as follows:

- *One Teach, One Observe* is defined as one teacher leading the lesson while the other watches specifically for either a teaching technique or student evidence.

- *One Teach, One Assist* works in a similar fashion to *One Teach, One Observe*, but the assistant's role is to intentionally work with specific students or in a predetermined role.

- *Station Teaching* is designed for both teachers to teach different but related content to the students in small groups in a rotating cycle.

- *Parallel Teaching* occurs when each co-teacher teaches the same lesson to a smaller group of students at the same time.

- *Supplemental Teaching* is designed for one teacher to instruct the students at grade level; the other teacher works with those who need extension or remediation.

- *Alternative or Differentiated Teaching* occurs when both teachers present the same information to a group of students, utilizing different instructional strategies to meet the same learning goals.

- *Team Teaching* is defined as both teachers equally participating in all aspects of the lesson.

Intentionally planning for each of these strategies is of critical importance for co-teaching to truly take place. Specific roles are identified for each teacher in the classroom in order to collect student evidence or to work with small groups of students to better meet their needs. The benefits of such a model span mentor teacher, teacher candidate and students alike (St. Cloud State University College of Education, 2009, Up Front Consulting, 2009). The students in the classroom are given more guidance and attention. The teacher candidate is able to collaboratively plan, observe, and receive immediate feedback on teaching. The mentor teacher not only has a second pair of hands, but also a colleague in planning, facilitating, assessing, and reflecting upon instruction.

A second critical aspect of the co-teaching model is effective communication skills between the mentor and teacher candidate (Gately & Gately, 2001; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004; St. Cloud State University School of Education, 2009). Good communicators are able to collaborate and share ideas more effectively than those who struggle with expressing their thoughts and needs. Training through a variety of activities and tools to spur discussion on teaching styles, likes, dislikes, communication preferences, and so forth are done to create an open environment where good communication is the norm (St. Cloud State University College of Education, 2009).

Knowing the critical components for successful implementation of the co-teach model can greatly increase the student teaching internship for all involved, especially the students in the co-taught classroom. St. Cloud State University researched the impact of the co-teaching model on student learning. In a five year study comparing reading and math scores in elementary through high school classrooms on the Minnesota standardized test, they consistently found that students in a co-taught classroom not only outperformed those in a classroom with a traditional student teacher, but also outperformed those students in a classroom led by a single professional teacher (Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2010). As one administrator put it, "It's a value-added model" (S. Lawson, personal communication, June 22, 2009).

Co-teaching: A Model to Teach 21st Century Learners

Students in today's classrooms have never experienced a world without the internet. They are a new type of learner, used to having access to information at the click of a mouse or, with the case of smart phones, literally in their back pockets. As such, the 21st century learner has different skill sets and different learning needs from students of the past. More and more, educators are acknowledging the call for shifting from traditional teaching methods in order to meet the new learning needs of today's Web 2.0 students. For example, the 2008 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Position Statement identifies that learners of the 21st century need to be able to, "Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross culturally," and to, "Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes" among others (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Similarly, Sanden and Darragh (2011) assert that education in general and technology integration in particular should, "Promote critical literacy opportunities such as

evaluating content and considering different points of view," and, "Provide opportunities for collaborating and sharing information in local and/or global settings" (p. 3).

The co-teaching model of the student teaching internship fosters these and other skills needed to teach the "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) in today's classrooms. An emphasis on the importance and value of collaboration is modeled within the classroom as the mentor teacher and teacher candidate work together planning, implementing, and evaluating lessons. In addition, students are receiving information and perspectives from two teachers. They can hear and experience different points of view and different approaches to learning and witness how the sharing of ideas and working together can deepen the learning gained.

Reimagining Partnerships: One Region's Approach to Implementing Co-teaching

Cognizant of the need for change in the traditional student teaching model, universities in the state of Washington began investigating the co-teaching model. A two day workshop on co-teaching presented by Nancy Bacharach and Teresa Washut Heck from St. Cloud State University was offered at Seattle University in February of 2009. The universities in the eastern Washington region: Whitworth University, Washington State University (WSU), Eastern Washington University (EWU), and Gonzaga University, recognized the benefits to the model. A brief overview of the co-teaching model and the potential benefits were presented by university representatives to school district administrators and university faculty at *The Evidence Based Paradigm: A Discussion about New Directions for Teacher Preparation Conference* in April that same year. The school administrators in attendance encouraged the local universities to implement the co-teaching model in the student teaching internship to enhance student learning gains.

Regional universities in eastern Washington responded immediately by inviting Nancy Bacharach and Teresa Washut Heck for a Train-the-Trainer workshop at Whitworth University in June of 2009. This was essential training to begin phasing in the co-teaching model for student teaching internships during the 2009-2010 school year. In an effort to streamline training and implementation, as well as to deliver a uniform voice on the expectations for this model of student teaching, the universities and regional districts formed the Eastern Washington Co-teaching Leadership Team (EWCLT). The group is comprised of representatives from each of the above mentioned universities as well as the local school districts with whom they partner.

The EWCLT began their efforts in the fall of 2009 by training all regional field supervisors together in the co-teaching model and its strategies for instruction. Each university's teacher preparation program provided some level of training for teacher candidates and mentors in co-teaching strategies. For example, Whitworth's Master in Teaching program trained its mentors during their regularly scheduled mentor training sessions. Teacher candidates learned about co-teaching strategies in their general methods classes. Co-teaching partnerships at all university programs were encouraged to use the co-teaching approach to the student teaching internship, but they were not required to do so. Support for the implementation of co-teaching strategies continued throughout the internship with supervisors coaching and working with the mentor-teacher candidate teams.

Mentor Support for Co-teaching

At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, participating mentor teachers from Whitworth University and one school district were surveyed to determine their support of the co-teaching model and ways to improve future training. Mentor teachers were given a survey with statements about co-teaching and asked to respond with the ranking of (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, or (4) strongly agree. Forty-seven mentor teachers responded to the survey. Of the forty-seven, fourteen were primary teachers (K-3), eight were intermediate level teachers (grades 4-6), five were middle school teachers, and fourteen were high school teachers. Six respondents did not list the grade level at which they taught. Overall, the initial responses for the co-teaching model in the student teaching internship were very positive with benefits to students, teacher candidates, and classroom teachers all identified.

Benefit to Students in the Classroom

When asked on a survey if they felt the co-teaching model benefitted students in the classroom, all forty-seven mentor teacher respondents said they "somewhat" or "strongly" agreed. Trends in the responses included lower student/teacher ratios, increased opportunities to differentiate instruction, collaboration around student progress, and students experiencing different teaching styles and strategies. "When two teachers are in the room, children get more guidance and differentiated instruction. Two teachers can collaborate easily to best meet their students' needs," one mentor teacher commented. Another noted, "The ability to share curriculum, teaching practices, and student groupings allows for individual needs of students to be met more efficiently." Improved opportunities for differentiation were also observed. "Co-teaching has allowed for many more opportunities for differentiation and small group teaching" and, "It is a helpful way for the students to have two resources/models" were just a few of the comments received supporting this model.

Benefit to Teacher Candidate Training

Mentor teachers felt strongly about the benefits of the co-teaching model for teacher candidates as well. When asked if they felt co-teaching was an effective model to benefit a teacher-candidate's professional training, fifteen (32%) said they somewhat agreed and twenty-eight (59.6%) said they strongly agreed. Explanations centered on the benefits of increased collaboration and mentoring, immediate feedback for the teacher candidates, and more time allowed for trying out different teaching strategies. Mentor teachers explained, "Sharing the experience of teaching with another adult opens the door to so many possibilities- i.e. shared strengths, pre and post lesson evaluation, debriefing opportunities, different styles in the room," and, "It eases the teaching candidate into the classroom then lets the teaching candidate be seen as a person in charge." Another remarked, "There is always learning going on-from both sides," while others commented, "It was helpful for the mentor to be in the room and to work in tandem. She was able to observe much more, try new ideas with support, and work with smaller groups."

Four people (8.5%) said they somewhat disagreed that co-teaching is a valuable professional practice to benefit the teacher candidate's professional training. Trends in these four responses included feeling co-teaching didn't represent real-world teaching environments and the need for mentors and teacher candidates to be dedicated to the model. One mentor teacher said,

"It only works if the supervising teacher knows how to work it and is willing to be observed practicing the strategies. More time for the supervising teacher is needed." Other mentor teachers mentioned their belief that teacher candidates should have the experience of being alone in the classroom, "While co-teaching is beneficial to students, I feel the teacher candidates need to be on their own in situations to learn the 'down and dirty' aspects of teaching (time management, classroom management, etc.)." Similarly, another commented, "While a valuable model and practice, it does not accurately reflect the reality of the classroom. It is a better practice for scaffolding the candidate into independence."

It is the belief of the EWCLT that time for a teacher candidate to teach on his or her own is essential for mastering classroom management and instructional skills. This "solo teaching" time is still an honored practice with the co-teaching model. Solo teaching is encouraged after the teacher candidate has gained the skills and confidence necessary to teach after co-teaching for a period of time. At least two weeks of solo teaching, which may occur continuously or at various points throughout the internship, are encouraged by the EWCLT. To clarify this expectation and the rationale behind it, "solo teaching" was added to all written and presentation training materials for the 2010-2011 school year.

Recommendations for Training Mentors and Teacher Candidates

When analyzing the suggestions offered regarding how to improve the facilitation of the co-teach model of student teaching, several patterns emerged. Among the most often noted were providing more examples of what co-teaching looks like through videos or observation, integrating the training into the teacher preparation programs so candidates are prepared at the beginning of student teaching, and conducting the co-teach training sessions with the mentor and teacher candidate together. The EWCLT implemented these suggestions during the 2010-2011 school year with notable success.

Administrative Support for Co-Teaching

Administrative support at the district and building level is essential in transitioning to the co-teaching model. A shared vision of the changes in the student-teaching internship to enhance student learning and teacher training facilitates the collaboration and enhances partnerships in a variety of ways. For example, the MidValley Consortium for Teacher Education in Virginia, comprised of four universities and seven school districts, meets annually to discuss teacher preparation and provide shared trainings throughout the year. The twenty year old partnership has led to more effective teachers, a reduction of placement issues, and effective communication practices between universities and school districts (Moody, J., Brownscombe, S., Coffman, D. & Lemons, L., 2011).

Partner districts in the eastern Washington region have voiced strong support for the co-teaching model. Administrators were interviewed the winter of 2010-2011 regarding their opinions on the co-teaching model and what they found beneficial. When asked how co-teaching was a valuable professional practice that benefits student learning, Debra Clemens, Associate Superintendent of Cheney Public Schools responded:

> Co-teaching is a valuable professional practice that benefits student learning throughout our organization because it supports the model of two adults working collaboratively in the classroom to best meet the instructional level of the students enrolled in the class. In

virtually all of our classrooms students have a range of ability levels; the goal of our teachers is to provide focused instruction targeted to the student's learning edge. Throughout our organization I have witnessed para-educators and teachers co-teaching; inclusion (special education and general education) teachers co-teaching, Title I and regular education teachers co-teaching, and student teachers and mentor teachers co-teaching. Co-teaching is a practice we fully embrace because we recognize that when adults work together to best serve students there is a stronger chance that students will develop the knowledge and skills needed to be successful. (Personal communication, January 19, 2011)

The administrators were also asked if they felt co-teaching was a valuable professional practice to benefit the teacher candidate's training. They collectively voiced that co-teaching was more effective than the traditional model of solo-teaching for a variety of reasons. Jan Beauchamp, Assistant Superintendent for Academic Affairs of East Valley School District #361 said, "The opportunity to work side-by side with an experienced teacher is much more valuable than the trial and error that often occurs when teacher candidates are on their own. The modeling and coaching consistently provided by the mentor teacher creates a valuable learning experience" (Personal communication, December 1, 2010). In addition, the administrators noted that co-teaching effectively taught teacher candidates how to work effectively with other adults and colleagues in the classroom, modeling the level of collaboration expected of today's educators.

Conclusion

One cannot help but wonder how the student teaching experience illustrated in the opening quote would have been different if the teacher candidate had participated in the co-teach model of student teaching. It is possible, of course, that Corey still would have thrown that chair at the teacher candidate. However, having had the opportunity to discuss with the mentor teacher what had happened, why, and what could have been done differently, may have led to fewer tears and lessened anxiety regarding classroom management and led to more opportunities for students to learn that semester.

Co-teaching as a model for the student teaching internship is a win-win-win for all involved: the teacher candidate, students, and mentor. The advantages of co-teaching voiced by the mentors and administrators in the eastern Washington region serve to exemplify the needed change in the student teaching internship for better training, service to the students, and enhanced partnerships between universities and districts. The co-teach model in general, and the Eastern Washington Co-teaching Leadership Team in particular, have provided an opportunity to reimagine traditional university and district partnerships. The potential of the co-teach model may best be expressed by one mentor teacher in the exit survey, "What a benefit to have two adults teaching together in one class! So lucky. Great things happen."

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