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LISTENING TO THE VOICE IN THE FIELD: COOPERATING TEACHER, CANDIDATE AND SUPERVISOR PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: *The researcher surveyed teacher candidates, cooperating teachers and university supervisors in a teacher preparation program at a 4-year, public university. This article focuses on a four semester study surveying the perceptions of pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and university supervisors as to the necessary elements for a collaborative framework in a co-teaching environment.*

Over the past decade, PK-12 settings have recognized the increased need for collaboration through their use of communities of practice, professional learning communities, and through an increase in team planning. University teacher preparation programs have long been the authoritative source of knowledge and the hierarchy that exists between universities, practitioners and community members puts relationships at risk. Sleeter (2014) highlights the gaps within the university system in her call for more collaboration on research agendas that link teacher education to student achievement. Researchers often write for themselves rather than collaborating with practitioners to find solutions to common problems (Sleeter, 2014). Helmsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) concur: “Practitioners are identified as seeking new solutions to operational matters whilst the researchers are characterized as seeking new knowledge” (p. 460). This lack of collaboration to meet the needs of pre-service teachers and in turn PK-12 students only further divides the two educational systems. The lack of communication and a third space to build a common explanatory framework divides the vision of teaching and learning and leaves congruence to chance.

At many universities, practitioners or recently retired practitioners supervise clinical experiences. Although this supports the relationship and connection between practitioner and the university, these individuals have no authority to participate in decisions that impact program development or change (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Burrell, 2004; Zeichner, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Closing this gap and validating relationships amongst stakeholders has the power to shift research to build a knowledge base for teacher preparation. With a new focus on the development of clinical partnerships and practice, how are universities developing the relationships and collaborative ecosystems necessary for candidates, school partners and K-12 students to thrive?

Collaborative models facilitate the dialogue necessary to meet student needs. Abbott and McNight (2010) highlighted the impact of collaboration between educators by indicating three positive outcomes: more accurate identification of student needs and instructional strategies, greater communication across grade levels and content areas, and an increase in job satisfaction and teacher retention. Given the influx of new teachers into the field and an increase in retirements, these collaborative practices have become more relevant and necessary. School districts see the biggest loss of teachers within the first five years; turnover rates have increased by 28 percent since the 1990s (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010).

The preparation of pre-service teachers requires a number of critical features. One of the most important aspects of a teacher education program is connecting teacher candidates with master teachers in a classroom, working together constantly (Darling-Hammond, 2001). It is not enough to teach candidates theory without also providing opportunities for practice. Therefore, university and district partners must engage in dialogue and collaborate in the process to ensure student-centered, relevant field experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Classroom teachers are working in an age of accountability, and must work to ensure all students are meeting crucial learning objectives. A true collaboration between the university and school partners puts the focus on the PK-12 learner, and allows the team to unite in meeting the learning objectives for a diverse group of learners.

Merely increasing clinical experiences does not increase their effectiveness (Zeichner, 2012). Universities need to recognize the role PK-12 practitioners play in the process of developing pre-service educators. Practitioners understand student response to a variety of strategies, the engagement each draws, and the impact on assessment.

Literature Review

The most powerful teacher preparation programs require students to spend extensive time in the field practicing skills related to current coursework (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Candidates work alongside expert teachers to put coursework into practice, receiving support and guidance along the way. These field experiences are possible with collaboration between the university, district partners, and teacher candidates.

The concept of third space has been used in multiple fields. Third space refers to the creation of blended spaces for university faculty, practitioners and community members to collaborate and generate ideas to increase teacher effectiveness (Zeichner, 2010). The focus is on the development of trust, collaboration, and consistent communication. An inability to pool resources to meet the needs of P-12 students and pre-service teachers leads to a lack of communication. Unclear expectations, misalignment of coursework to the clinical experience and an absence of relationships with P-12 practitioners may all create an environment that is not conducive to learning.

University teacher preparation programs have long been the authoritative source of knowledge regarding pedagogy. The hierarchy that exists between universities, practitioners and community members puts relationships at risk. Those invested in the needs of pre-service teachers should develop collaborative partnerships (Zeichner, 2010). As noted earlier, P-12 settings have recognized the increased need for collaboration through their use of communities of practice, professional learning communities and through an increase in team planning. Sleeter (2014) highlights the gaps within the university system in her call for more collaboration on research agendas that link teacher education to student achievement. For example, at many universities, practitioners or recently retired practitioners supervise clinical experiences. This supports the relationship and connection between practitioner and the university, but these individuals have no authority to participate in decisions that impact program development or change (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Burrell, 2004; Zeichner, 2002; Zeichner, 2010). Closing this gap and validating relationships amongst stakeholders has the power to shift research to build a knowledge base for teacher preparation.

Method

At the outset of this study, researchers posed the following questions: What common explanatory framework is necessary for a collaborative environment? What elements do participants see as necessary for success? This researcher surveyed each of the teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors in a teacher preparation program at a 4-year, public university.

Program and Participants

The K-12 teacher preparation program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is a four-semester undergraduate program. Teacher candidates have four levels of field experiences prior to reaching clinical practice or student teaching. Once reaching clinical practice, candidates participate in a 16-week, all-day experience. This immersion into the PK-12 environment is founded on a collaborative model. In the collaborative model, the cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate are both actively engaged in the planning, instruction and assessment for the classroom through the use of co-teaching strategies. This allows for increased collaboration and reflection on teaching and learning. Parity is encouraged from the start of the experience, as candidates are seen as equals to the cooperating teacher in the eyes of students.

Team teaching, cooperative teaching, and co-teaching are among the most successful collaborative models (Austin, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend, Reising & Cook, 1993; McKenzie, 2009; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Fisch & Bennett, 2013). In recent years, there has been a shift in the use of co-teaching during clinical experiences, especially during clinical practice. Co-teaching is defined as two or more teachers working together in the same classroom, sharing responsibility for student learning (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Champerlain & Shamberger 2010; Badiali & Titus, 2010). There are seven strategies: one teach, one observe; one teach, one assist; parallel teaching; station teaching; differentiated teaching; alternative teaching, and team teaching. The strategies frame the expectations and yield conversations about common practice. There is a difference in co-teaching in the special education model versus clinical practice. In special education, two experienced educators are working side by side. During clinical practice co-teaching, an experienced teacher is working with an inexperienced one. Key differences

between the two models include structure, participating professionals and the relationship between those involved (Friend, Embury and Clarke, 2015).

Unique to the experience is the Team Development Workshop. The intent of the workshop is to foster professional relationships, understand how co-teaching strategies support apprentice teachers, develop a common vocabulary for assessment, and provide training for coaching conversations. It also allows time for the team to begin collaboratively planning for the semester. The workshop is held at the start of the semester. Cooperating teachers, pre-service teachers and university supervisors all attend.

Data Collection and Analysis

To gather data, this researcher developed an open ended survey instrument to be used at the end of each workshop. Teacher candidates, cooperating teachers and university supervisors were all asked to complete the survey. The survey was anonymous and color coded by role. Over the course of four semesters, 71% (429) of cooperating teachers, 100% (509) of teacher candidates, and 96% (107) of university supervisors participated in the survey.

Several themes emerged during the data analysis. Understandably, valued strengths of the workshop and additional needs varied amongst groups (cooperating teachers, candidates and supervisors) but not as much within groups. What common explanatory framework is necessary for a co-teaching environment? What elements do participants see as necessary for success? A brief discussion follows each presentation of findings.

A classical content analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti. Below are the top five themes found:

	Fall 2014	Spring 2015	Fall 2015	Spring 2016	Overall
Co-Teaching Strategies	28%	23%	24%	34%	28%
Support and Expectations	23%	26%	27%	17%	33%
Communication	26%	23%	10%	17%	19%
Unpacking Standards	7%	11%	22%	9%	15%
Planning	5%	6%	10%	14%	12%

- Co-teaching strategies included knowledge of the strategies and how to use them, understanding how each can be used for guidance and support of a developing educator and the increased ability to meet PK-12 student needs.
- Support and expectations included the logistics surrounding the experience. Participants valued discussing the expectations as a team, clarifying the calendar and the overall sense of team. Cooperating teachers commented that it was “reassuring to know the university is there to support.”
- Communication included the time to talk as a team, the importance of understanding each others’ perspectives and learning strategies to support conversation and feedback.
- Unpacking the standards referred to the time to learn more about the performance assessment vocabulary and terminology. Candidates valued the time to role play coaching conversations utilizing the performance assessment indicators.
- Planning centered around the importance of planning and understanding the impact co-planning will have on the semester.

Conclusion

If the collaborative model facilitates more dialogue, educators are better able to identify student needs, instructional strategies and impact achievement. A common explanatory framework allows opportunity for rich discussions about learning for pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and university supervisors. It sets the foundation for communication and collaboration. True collaboration is more than meeting with other teachers to achieve a set of tasks. It requires opportunities to “examine, critique, and support another’s work in a safe and supportive environment” (Murray, 2015, p. 23). The themes above highlight the voice of the entire clinical practice team: cooperating teachers, pre-service teachers and university supervisors.

Blended spaces for university faculty, cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers to collaborate and generate ideas leads to the development of trust, collaboration, and consistent communication. Addressing the

themes outlined above prior to the start of the experience clarifies expectations, aligns course goals and supports relationships with P-12 practitioners. This framework sets the foundation for an environment conducive to learning.

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