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Team Teaching Buddies: Student Teaching in the Era of edTPA

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Abstract

Student teachers are typically placed in a classroom with a single mentor teacher. Although there have been many changes in education within the past decades, including new teacher certification requirements, there has been little modification in this student teaching structure. It is time to review student teaching programs to find the best way to insure that student teacher candidates have an optimal experience. This study examines a buddy approach wherein two student teachers work as a team in a classroom with a single mentor teacher to determine if this is a useful paradigm for helping students through the certification process.

Keywords: edTPA, elementary, student teaching, teaching buddies, team teaching

Team Teaching Buddies: Student Teaching in the Era of edTPA

The college teacher education program usually includes at least a semester of student teaching (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010). During this time teacher candidates use their background knowledge to bring theory into practice to best help their students' learning. In some states today, this is also the time that teacher candidates must prepare their submission for the newly required edTPA (educational Teacher Performance Assessment) certification assessment (SCALE, 2014).

The edTPA certification for Elementary Education consists of four tasks that must be addressed during student teaching. These tasks are described in detail in the edTPA Elementary Education Assessment Handbook (SCALE, 2014).

Task 1 consists of planning for literacy instruction and assessment. Student teachers plan 3-5 related literacy lessons (a learning segment) that are aligned with standards (such as the Common Core State Standards) and address a literacy strategy or skill related to the comprehension or composition of text.

Task 2 consists of videotaping one of the literacy lessons including student interactions. Student teachers are instructed to include up to 15 minutes of unedited taped segments that document how the intended lesson plan was carried out.

Task 3 consists of an assessment of the teaching to see if the goals and objectives were reached. Additional artifacts (e.g., elementary students' work) and commentaries (student teachers respond to prompts for each of the sections) are also required.

Task 4 is a mathematics assessment. Student teachers develop an assessment of mathematical student learning. After analysis, the student teacher must select three students who need further work with the lesson concepts, design a re-engagement of instruction to address

student needs, and reteach and evaluate student learning. Again, artifacts and commentaries are included in the edTPA submission.

In light of the new certification assessment, one might wonder how the new requirements would impact the student teaching structure that is in place on many campuses. The usual student teaching practice is for a single student teacher to be mentored by one teacher in a classroom (Rush, Blair, Chapman, Codner, & Pearce, 2008). The student teacher learns from the classroom teacher and the students while gaining important classroom experience. The classroom teacher benefits from the student teacher's assistance and also from new ideas the student teacher may provide, and the students benefit by having an extra adult in the room who is able to give support in myriad ways (Rosenfeld, Givner, & Tasimowicz, 2013).

Although this type of student teaching practice is very common, the challenges of teaching have increased over the years without much change to this structure. (Bacharach et al., 2010; Bullough et al., 2003; Wise, 2004; Zeichner, 2002). The new edTPA certification requirement is just one example. This points to a need to reexamine the traditional student teaching structure.

An alternative model for solo student teaching is a team teaching or co-teaching model where two student teachers pair with a classroom teacher. Co-teaching is not a new idea; it has been used in the area of special education inclusion classes because educators realized that a special education teacher paired with a general classroom teacher could meet the needs of all the students better than a single teacher (Badiali & Titus, 2010).

In a paired student teaching model, student teachers learn from the teacher and students as before, but the additional learning and feedback from a peer has been reported as a very valuable experience for the student teachers (Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Merrell, 2008;

Rosenfeld, Givner, & Tasimowicz, 2013). The students in the classroom also benefit from having another adult in the room and the teacher has an auxiliary pair of helping hands.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the benefits and drawbacks of student teaching as part of a paired team and whether this model is helpful for preparing for the edTPA. In particular, we would like to determine which features of the paired student teaching experience seem to be especially helpful - or detrimental - for students in preparing for the edTPA.

Method

Participants

Student teachers chose to be either in a paired (with another student teacher) or in a solo teaching situation. Over the four semesters (fall 2012-spring 2014), 22 student teachers took part in team student teaching under the mentorship of four veteran cooperating teachers. Sixteen of the student teachers were undergraduates majoring in childhood education and six were graduate childhood education students. All were enrolled at an urban university and were placed in an urban public elementary K-5 school.

Instrumentation

Student teachers who participated in team teaching filled out a survey constructed by the researcher to learn more about student teaching as part of a team. Cooperating teachers received a slightly different survey that included a question about the benefits to their students. Informal interviews were conducted. Information was also gleaned from the weekly journals that the student teachers wrote. Some student teachers were asked to videotape themselves discussing their classroom experiences.

Procedure

During their semester of student teaching, all student teachers completed 300 or more hours of student teaching in the school and they attended a seminar that met for two hours once a week. The seminar was team-taught by two veteran teacher/supervisors who modeled cooperative teaching. One of the seminar sessions was devoted to a videotaping workshop. Student teachers were advised to discuss their lesson plans with their cooperating teacher prior to presenting their lessons to the class. All student teachers were formally observed a total of three times each by their field supervisor and their cooperating teacher. They kept weekly journals in which they reflected on two events from each week such as lessons, student interactions, classroom management, etc. These journals were either emailed to the supervisor or posted on the Blackboard web site on a weekly basis. The supervisor responded to each student teacher with comments and advice. All student teachers videotaped themselves teaching and selected a short clip of a video to share and discuss during the seminar.

Results of the Surveys

Did you know the student teacher you teamed with before you began student teaching?

Of the 22 student teachers who chose to participate in student teaching as part of a pair, 19 returned their surveys. Only 9 student teachers reported that they knew each other from prior classes before they were in a paired situation; 10 did not know each other.

Would you say student teaching was an enjoyable experience?

Would you say that this was a good learning experience for you?

What did you like about your experience?

What would you like to change about your experience?

All student teachers reported that student teaching was a good, enjoyable experience for them. Student teachers commented that they appreciated participating in an authentic teaching

situation as a teacher. Student teachers liked having a partner with whom they could discuss their lessons and teaching techniques and who was in a similar situation to themselves. They could see other approaches to situations and learn about other teaching styles. Three student teachers commented that they appreciated being able to teach in their own style. One commented that having a partner was “most useful with the videotaping of the lessons” (Student in Fall 2013).

When asked what they would like to change about the experience, 8 students replied that they wouldn't change anything. Three students would have preferred more orientation and guidance prior to student teaching. One student mentioned being involved with other grade levels and another mentioned changing the daily starting time. One student reflected that she would start working on her portfolio from the first week because “completing all the work for both student teaching and edTPA is overwhelming and not enough information is available” (Student in Fall 2013). Another student commented that she would have liked clearer instructions on edTPA.

Would you recommend that student teachers be part of a student teaching team in the future?

Under what circumstances do you think student teaching as part of a team would work; when would it not be a good idea?

Almost all students recommended that student teachers be part of a student teaching team in the future; only one student did not. This student's reply was a “maybe,” citing the new certification demands that made it difficult to achieve the requirements when completing student teaching as a pair. Eight students mentioned that partners need to get along and be compatible. Three students mentioned that the workload is lighter when there is an extra student teacher in the classroom.

Student teachers felt that teaching as part of a team would not be a good idea if student teachers were not compatible and could not get along (8/19). Student teachers (7/19) also commented that team teaching won't work if you "randomly assign people to work together" (Student from Fall 2012). Teamed student teachers must be willing to work together to do what is best for their students. Student teachers must "genuinely like each other as people and personalities" (Another student from Fall 2012). One student teacher reported that "when you tell one student no for something and they turn and go to the next teacher and she wouldn't know you said no so she'll say yes" (Student from Fall 2012), this does not work well.

One cooperating teacher commented that the teacher must be organized and devote sufficient time to two people. Another reported that in a small classroom setting, three people might be too many. Another comment mentioned that student teachers "need to experience time teaching and doing things alone so that they can feel the full effect of how much work a teacher really does without help" (Cooperating teacher from Spring 13).

What do you feel you gained as a result of student teaching with a colleague that you would not have gained if you were in a solo situation?

More than half the student teachers (12) mentioned that they learned from their partner. One student commented, "I learned a lot more from watching my partner teach than I learned when watching my cooperating teacher...because we have the same level of experience" (Student from Fall 2013). Ten mentioned the support they received from being paired. Comments included gaining self-confidence, "two heads are better than one," and having a partner who understands the process. Student teachers mentioned the discussions they had in which they shared knowledge, learned to collaborate, and received extra feedback from their partners. Student teachers also gained new skills. They learned to grade and assess students, they

gained technology experience (especially if they had a technologically savvy partner), and learned new ideas and teaching strategies.

What do you feel you missed out on as a result of student teaching with a colleague that you would have had if you were in a solo situation?

Seven students responded that they didn't feel that they missed anything by being in a paired situation. Seven also felt that they gained from teaming because they felt things were easier, they could film each other teaching and could support each other. Seven commented that they would have liked to try to teach with a full workload or teach the whole day, things they could not do as part of a pair. Four students felt that they missed one-on-one attention that they would have had if they did not have a partner.

Would you say that you received appropriate guidance and mentoring from your cooperating teacher? Please explain.

All 19 student teachers responded that they felt they received appropriate guidance and mentoring. 17 student teachers commented that their cooperating teacher was extremely helpful and supportive, and gave appropriate feedback and guidance.

Cooperating teachers reported that their K-5 students benefited from having two student teachers because their students received more one-on-one attention. Cooperating teachers commented that their students gained individualized instruction that helped them to excel, the teacher could place students in groups without having to constantly rotate among them, and students learned how to work collaboratively. One cooperating teacher noted that if one student teacher was absent, the other was present to help out.

Discussion/Implications/Conclusions

Student teachers and cooperating teachers unanimously agreed that the paired student teaching model was positive for all parties involved; student teacher buddies reported that their experience was good and enjoyable. Almost all student teachers (18/19) recommended that this model be continued in the future. Having a positive student teaching experience is important for new teachers because if they feel that teaching is enjoyable, they may persevere to be certified and then continue in the profession. There are many reasons to drop out of teaching – among them low pay, not enough respect, students who are difficult to teach, parents who don't care or who are meddlesome, too many administrative duties and edicts, and of course, some beginning teachers need to pass the edTPA in order to be certified. If teacher candidates have a negative student teaching experience, they might decide to skip the rigorous certification process. At the moment, it seems that there are more teacher candidates than there are positions, but this situation could change if student teachers no longer want to go through the certification process before they can join the profession.

We want our teacher candidates to strive to do the best they can. On the edTPA assessment, on the highest level (Level 5) in Rubric 8, Deepening Student Learning, the candidate “facilitates interactions among students so they can evaluate their own abilities to apply the essential strategy in meaningful reading or writing contexts” (SCALE, 2014). In order to facilitate student interactions, student teachers must have an understanding of what it means to learn together. Paired student teachers often discussed teaching approaches and other classroom issues before bringing them to the attention of their cooperating teacher. This is the kind of collaboration that is also useful for their young students to adopt.

Being able to cooperate with others is an important skill for anyone who has a job and wants to keep it. Modeling cooperative behavior for students may help them to cooperate better. When students see their teachers work together to achieve a goal, this can be a way for them to subconsciously pick up this behavior or, alternatively, they can be instructed to cooperate very explicitly.

Working as part of a team allows student teachers to give and take feedback from their teaching buddy. Student teachers had discussions where they shared knowledge and learned to collaborate. The extra feedback they received from their buddy helped to improve their teaching. A person cannot make an effort to improve if s/he is unaware of what needs improvement. The edTPA asks student teachers to reflect on their teaching and on student learning. Having discussions with their partners as part of their student teaching experience should enable student teachers to effectively describe their own teaching processes.

Interestingly, the edTPA does not address classroom management directly. Student teachers are expected to be able to manage their classes adequately. However, supervisors of student teachers are aware of the difficulties that many student teachers encounter with classroom management, especially in high needs schools. Having a buddy who is not the cooperating teacher and who can give feedback and/or model good classroom management is a positive advantage for someone who needs that kind of help. Having a buddy who can reinforce (with the students) what a partner stated in the classroom is also helpful. This support enables student teachers to gain self-confidence. One student teacher reported that she gained self-confidence because she knew she was not alone and her pair would understand and relate to her anxiety and nervousness. A partner who understands the edTPA certification process is a valuable resource in a classroom.

The edTPA certification requires 15 minutes of unedited videotape clips as part of the submission. Student teachers who were in paired situations had a cameraperson available all the time. Both partners were aware of the requirements for the videotape because they had been to a workshop on videotaping that was very helpful for preparing for the edTPA. Students were advised to tape as many lessons as possible so that they could select the best clips for submission. If student teachers had only a few tapes, their selection process was very limited.

Paired student teachers mentioned that they learned so much from their partners: teaching strategies, management skills, technology tips, and other ideas to help them in their new profession. Teaching buddies relied upon each other for the skills in which they were weak, and hopefully picked up some of these new skills themselves.

Some student teachers mentioned that they had a lighter workload because they shared responsibilities in the classroom. If students have a lighter workload, this is better for preparing for the edTPA, which is a very time-consuming endeavor. On the other hand, some student teachers mentioned that they felt that their experience in a paired situation did not permit them to gain an understanding of what solo teaching without any help would be like. This is something that needs to be addressed in the future, although student teachers will hopefully be able to tackle this problem when it arises.

Some student teachers also commented that they missed one-on-one mentoring, but in the end, all students felt that they had had appropriate mentoring and guidance. Apparently, whatever mentoring student teachers missed in the paired situation was replaced by working with a buddy. A couple of student teachers remarked that they became good friends with their teaching partners. Although becoming a friend is not a goal of this student teaching structure,

and the likelihood of both student teachers being placed in the same school when they are hired is small, it is a nice bonus to have a colleague with whom to communicate and with whom to exchange ideas in the future.

One of the issues that has arisen with the new edTPA requirements is how much of our seminar time should be spent on edTPA preparation in lieu of the seminar information and discussions we had prior to the advent of the edTPA. We don't want student teaching to be equated with edTPA preparation, but with so much at stake and with such a rigorous assessment, we are trying to sort out what information and activities are important for our seminars. This is an ongoing conversation.

Another consideration to make when considering student teaching placements is cooperating teacher burnout. This was not mentioned in any of the comments, but it had been mentioned when schools were looking for cooperating teachers. If fewer teachers are needed to mentor student teachers, perhaps teachers will be more inclined to take on the responsibility and they might not be needed every semester. On the other hand, there are teachers who look forward to having extra help in the room each semester in the form of student teachers.

With new edTPA certification requirements in place, paired student teaching could be a helpful alternative to traditional student teaching practice. The benefits of working with a buddy seem to outweigh the few negatives that are mentioned. It is time to rethink how we prepare our future teachers so they can best address the needs of all their students and how we can best provide training for our future teachers.

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