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# Team Teaching: A New Paradigm for Student Teachers

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Team Teaching: A New Paradigm for Student Teachers

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### **Abstract**

The typical student teaching practice in schools of higher education with teacher education programs is to place a single teacher candidate in a classroom with a veteran mentor teacher. This paper discusses a new paradigm for student teachers, placing two teacher candidates in a classroom with a veteran mentor teacher. Student teachers who were part of a team and their mentor teachers were surveyed to discover their perceptions about this model. The paper discusses the benefits and drawbacks for the student teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the classroom students. Results from past research as well as from this study indicate that this is a win-win-win situation for all.

*Keywords:* student teaching, team teaching, paired student teaching or co-teaching, teacher preparation, mentoring

### Team Teaching: A New Paradigm for Student Teachers

The culmination of the teacher education program in many schools of higher education generally includes a semester or so of student teaching (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). This is a time when teacher candidates (student teachers) bring their background knowledge of theory into practice to test how they can best help students to learn.

The usual student teaching practice is for a single student teacher to be mentored by one qualified veteran classroom teacher. 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 innumerable ways. (See Fig. 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This type of student teaching practice is very common, but the challenges of teaching have increased over the years without much change to this model (Bacharach et al., 2010; Bullough et al., 2003; Wise, 2004). Whereas students in K-12 schools often collaborate with their peers to solve problems, teachers often work alone to prepare and present their lessons. There is a need to reexamine the traditional student teaching model to ascertain that this is indeed the best way to prepare our teachers in the 21st century. Perhaps our student teachers should also collaborate with their peers.

An alternative model for solo student teaching is a team teaching or co-teaching model where two student teachers pair with a classroom teacher in a team teaching situation. 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). The students in the classroom also benefit from having another adult in the room and the teacher has an auxiliary pair of helping hands. (See Fig. 2).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) report that teacher candidates can benefit from participating in practice as they work closely with teachers and students within a broad community of practitioners including experienced teachers, other student teachers, teacher educators, and students. In this way, the experiences, practices, theories, and knowledge of the profession will be accessible to them. Darling-Hammond et al. propose that the nature of the support that teacher candidates receive during their fieldwork helps them make sense of their experiences and learn from them. Guidance, mentoring, and peer support are important in helping teacher candidates receive necessary modeling, coaching, and feedback.

NCATE (2010) indicates that effective teachers have a tremendous impact on student learning. NCATE also reports that there is a limited research base in terms of what effective clinical preparation should be. The present study solicited feedback on the team student teaching experience from student teachers and cooperating teachers to explore a possible means for preparing effective teachers who have gained good collaborative skills and have learned from each other.

### **Method**

Student teachers are often exposed to the newest trends in teaching at the university during the coursework that they take. This is sometimes in opposition to the traditional way students are taught in the schools in which the student teachers are placed. When student teachers are faced with this dilemma and they are unable to practice the teaching methods that they have been exposed to, this sometimes promotes stress and leads student teachers to worry about the kind of teachers they will become (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004).

It should be noted that great care was taken to avoid this situation in placing the student teachers in this study. The teachers who mentored the paired students had all graduated from the same university in which the student teachers were enrolled. Two of the three mentor teachers were concurrently teaching education courses as members of the adjunct faculty at the university, and were very familiar with new educational trends. Student teachers and mentor teachers were in agreement about using constructivist, hands-on methods and cooperative learning to facilitate their lessons. All were aware of the many learners and levels in the classroom, hence differentiation for maximal student learning also was incorporated into the lessons. These teaching practices are also aligned with the edTPA (educational Teacher Performance Assessment) requirements for certification.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine the benefits and drawbacks of student teaching as part of a paired team. Questions include:

What are the circumstances that seem to work well; what circumstances don't work well?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of a paired student teaching model?

Do student teachers in a team teaching situation feel that they are receiving adequate guidance from their mentoring teacher?

How do students in grades 1-5 benefit from having an extra student teacher in the classroom?

### **Participants**

During the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters, two classes of student teachers (15 in the fall and 10 in the spring) chose to be either in a paired (with another student teacher) or in a solo teaching situation. There were three cooperating mentor teachers who supervised two student teachers each semester for a total of 12 student teachers (10 females and 2 males) who completed their student teaching as part of a team teaching pair during the year. Eleven of the student teachers were undergraduates majoring in childhood education and one was a graduate childhood education student. All were enrolled at an urban university. Student teachers were placed in an urban public elementary K-5 school. Of the 12 student teachers, 11 returned the survey. All of cooperating teachers returned the survey.

### **Instrumentation**

Student teachers in the team teaching group filled out a survey constructed by a researcher with yes/no questions as well as open-ended questions 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 reflective weekly journals that the student teachers wrote.

### **Procedure**

All the student teachers in both team teaching and solo situations completed 300 or more hours of student teaching in the school. The student teaching experience includes a seminar that meets for two hours once a week to discuss topics related to teaching. All 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 three times by their field supervisor and their cooperating teacher. All student teachers 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 Blackboard on a weekly basis. The supervisor responded to each student teacher with comments and advice. All student teachers had to videotape themselves teaching. All student teachers selected a short (about a 5 minute) clip of a video to share and discuss during the seminar. At the end of the student teaching experience, paired student teachers and their cooperating teachers were given surveys to fill out.

## **Results**

### **Results from Students**

A review of the data indicates that paired student teachers all perceive that they had an enjoyable experience that was also a good learning experience. Paired student teachers reported that they learned new ideas and teaching techniques, and how to collaborate with each other. They received honest feedback from a peer and one gained technological expertise from a co-worker who had strong computing skills. Another student 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. One student teacher liked the guidance his cooperating teacher provided as well as the independence he had when he taught. This was echoed by a student teacher who commented that she liked being able to teach in her own style. All students recommend that student teachers be part of a student teaching team in the future.



When asked about the circumstances under which team student teaching would work and when it would not be a good idea, students thought that student teaching as part of a team would work if the two student teachers are willing to work together respectfully in a professional partnership, not try to outdo each other, but work to do what is best for the students. Student teachers who are "concerned with how they look or what they are doing will not have a good experience and will not make an enjoyable experience for the other party involved." One student teacher responded that she enjoyed having an assistant teacher by her side when she taught a solo lesson. Having "an extra pair of eyes" was found to be helpful. Another student teacher thought that if members of the team can get along, the experience will work, but randomly assigning people to work together would be unsuccessful. Partners need to work together to accommodate one another.

One student teacher pointed out that working in any school requires teamwork and that staff, family, students, and teachers make schools their own community. She noted that student teaching allowed

me to get used to working with those around me within the school community. It gave me courage to discuss lessons and other issues with fellow staff and faculty. If there is a student who is not working well with others or not paying attention in class, because of whatever reason (private or social), I have learned how to gain courage to ask the school social worker for help or bring the issue up to...the other teachers.

A student teacher observed that student teaching teams not only have the opportunity to share their experiences in teaching a lesson, but they also share what "we noticed about the ways our cooperating teacher was teaching a particular lesson." Thus, they could discuss their observations and examine each other's viewpoints, what was important about the lesson, what the

teacher was trying to accomplish and how s/he achieved her goals, how she managed the class, etc.

One student teacher noted that "the workload was lighter for each of us since we divided the subject areas between us," and that "more adults in a room full of students made classroom management easier." He noted in order for team teaching to be successful, the cooperating teacher needs to be agreeable to having more adults in the room.

Team teaching did not work well when one student teacher told a student she could not do something and the student then went to the second student teacher who, when asked the same question, gave permission. Another student teacher thought that team teaching would not work if each "individual was strong-willed, judgmental, overbearing and could not see eye to eye. Teams must be good communicators in and out of work....you must genuinely like each other as people and personalities....there is no faking that one for the duration of four months." One student teacher noted that mismatched personal style and personality could prevent a good student teaching experience.

Students were asked what they felt they gained as a result of team student teaching that they would not have gained in a solo situation. Responses centered on sharing knowledge and having discussions with each other about their teaching and their students, for example, how they should teach something or how they should manage a student's behavioral problems, and then discussing it with the cooperating teacher. Another respondent said that she "learned how to work together with someone...work as a team, collaborate with each other to make sure each person is doing the right thing and has a certain job to do. I couldn't have gotten that experience if I was by myself in a classroom. As a teacher you are not always alone, you have to work with other teachers on the curriculum and what you are going to teach." Student teachers appreciated

that they could get daily, additional, honest feedback and bounce ideas off each other. They liked having collegial help when needed. One student teacher responded, "We always gave each other feedback and helped each other out if it was necessary." Student teachers gained new suggestions to add to their teaching repertoire. A student teacher commented on how he would sometimes give up something he wanted to teach so he could accommodate his partner, but he gained new ideas because his partner taught differently than he did. One student teacher mentioned the extra technological practice she gained because her colleague's strength was with computers. Student teachers learned from each other, "whether it's a mistake while teaching or a certain technique that the other is using that can help while teaching."

When asked if they thought they missed something because they were not in a solo situation, almost all the respondents said that they felt that they missed nothing or that the benefits of teaching with a partner outweighed any shortcomings. One student commented that she missed having one-on-one attention from her cooperating teacher, but "felt it was better having someone else to observe and have experience with." Only one student teacher felt that he missed the full experience of trying to be a teacher. He said, "Since I had a partner, I was not able to take on the workload as a teacher." Even though he thought it was easier to have a partner, he felt that he missed having the experience of being a teacher with no other adults around, more typical of teaching positions that may be available.

All of the respondents felt that they had received appropriate guidance and mentoring from their cooperating teacher. A student teacher said "Our teacher gave comments to each person according to her strengths and weaknesses. I don't feel there was going to be any difference if I did student teaching alone." The student teachers were very positive in their comments about the guidance they received.

My teacher was excellent. She helped me so much. She gave me advice on things that I should do and work on. She tried to help me in any way she could. She helped with my lesson plans; she let me have access to all her lesson plans. She was a perfect mentor and I really feel like I gained a lot from being with her.

### **Results from Cooperating Teachers**

Cooperating teachers agreed that having two student teachers worked well in their classrooms, that they were able to appropriately guide and mentor both student teachers, and all were enthusiastic about recommending that student teachers be part of a student teaching team in the future. Cooperating teachers reported that their grade 1-5 students benefited from having two student teachers because their students received more one-on-one attention. One teacher commented that the students flourished with individualized instruction that helped them to excel. The teacher could place students in groups without having to constantly rotate among them. Another teacher noted that having two student teachers helped to differentiate instruction for the class.

Personalities and learning styles vary, and teachers do their best to help to meet the needs of all their students. In one class, students who were struggling in math were able to receive assistance via small group instruction. Students were rotated based upon their needs and a student teacher or teacher was available to help each group. Because of this, the students were able to gain confidence and obtain a better grasp of the material and/or concepts being taught. Students didn't feel pressured or ostracized, but rather felt secure as they learned new concepts.

In another class, the students also received differentiated instruction at their own academic level. Each student teacher prepared lessons and assessments for his/her group. Then, they switched groups. This gave them experiences with planning instruction for a high, medium

and low performing group. It also let them track groups of students' individual growth and collect and analyze data.

Instead of the teacher having to rotate through the groups during guided reading, the teacher assigned each of the student teachers and herself to a particular group. The teacher also rotated all of the instructors so that each student teacher could see the differences between the high, medium and low readers, and the students could benefit from the guidance of three different instructors.

Science was also much easier to manage as all the instructors together distributed materials and worked with groups. During writing workshop and independent reading, the instructors were able to conference with students to focus on their strengths and support their weaknesses.

A teacher summed up her thoughts in this way:

Overall, I feel that the presence of two student teachers benefits struggling students the most. However, those that do excel need to be challenged too and student teachers need to realize this. Sometimes it is better to hear about your successes and disappointments from a peer rather than the mentoring teacher. I work diligently to make sure my student teachers feel as though they are a part of the room and all the processes that teaching entails.

In a team teaching situation, the children are able to have discourse with many instructors and are given guidance to seek answers for their questions. This gives students a taste of how to work and handle learning in an inquiry based classroom.

The student teachers also benefit from watching one another teach and reflect upon their own teaching. One teacher reported,

As a team, we all sit together and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their lessons.

The student teachers also share their expertise in a specific subject area with one another.

I strongly believe that this helps them to be more comfortable when teaching a designated subject. Overall, I believe that both the student teachers and my students strongly benefit from this model.

A teacher mentioned that her students learned how to work collaboratively, and commented, "As teachers we need to work together to see how we can meet the needs of all our students by sharing ideas." Another commented that the students were able to "gain more knowledge because there were three people in the room with lots of information to offer."

A challenge noted by a teacher was how to provide student teachers with time teaching and doing things alone so that "they can feel the full effect of how much work a teacher really does without help." A second challenge was a concern about the size of the classroom. "In a small classroom setting, three people might be too much."

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

All the student teachers and cooperating teachers recommend that student teachers be part of a student teaching team in the future. All of the instructors involved in this study felt positively toward this new paradigm for student teaching and reported that they gained much from the experience. Student teachers felt more confident and less stressed about teaching; they appreciated the feedback they received from both their cooperating teacher and their colleague. They were able to collaborate effectively as part of a teaching community. Student teachers who participated in team teaching received guidance, mentoring, and peer support that Darling-Hammond, et al. (2005) recommended as being important in helping teacher candidates to

receive necessary modeling, coaching, and feedback. Both cooperative teachers and student teachers felt that the cooperating teachers were able to mentor their student teachers adequately.

The students also benefited from the team student teaching paradigm. With an additional instructor in the classroom, students were able to receive additional attention and help. If students were in three differentiated groups, each group could have an instructor oversee the work. This is a real plus for not only struggling students, but advanced students, too, who can have a mentor teacher to challenge them and move them to a higher level of learning. With an extra student teacher in the room, there are many more opportunities for interactions to occur. Cooperating teachers learn from their student teachers, too. (Compare Figs. 1 and 2.) This is a prescription for a win-win-win situation.

The survey data suggest that a primary strength of the team teaching model lies in the cooperative spirit and actions of the student teachers. When they treat each other with professionalism and respect, students teachers (and secondarily, their students) gain much from the feedback, ideas, support, and influence of their peer.

One of the student teachers reported that a drawback to the team student teaching experience was that students could ask one student teacher for permission to do something and when the student was denied, would go to the other student teacher to possibly receive permission. This is rather like the child who goes to a parent for something, doesn't receive the desired response, and goes to the other parent with the same request. Of course, when the parents realize what has happened, the child often gets into trouble. How this is handled in a classroom would have to be determined by the participants.

Another challenge to team student teaching is that there are more adults in the room than would be the usual practice in a school. Student teachers need time to teach in a solo situation

over a period of time so that they can gain confidence to teach on their own. Although team student teaching spreads out the teaching responsibilities, it may not be a realistic setting for the future. Again, time needs to be scheduled so that each student teacher feels prepared to enter the teaching field having had adequate practice.

In spite of the challenges to this model, student teachers and cooperating teachers all agreed that teaming was better for them and their students than the more traditional one-on-one model of student teaching. The benefits seem to far outweigh any drawbacks that were mentioned.

NCATE (2010) states that it is important for teacher preparation programs to ensure that teachers are able to collaborate with colleagues, students, and the community. In a co-teaching situation (one mentor teacher and one student teacher) reported at St. Cloud State University, there was a statistically significant difference in math and reading achievement scores between co-taught classes and those with only a single licensed teacher, indicating that the co-teaching classes benefited student proficiency on state assessments (NCATE, 2010). Perhaps having two student teachers would have a bigger impact on student learning. Further research is needed to determine if this is true.

The results of this study indicate that all participants felt that it was beneficial to have a team student teaching experience and all recommended that future student teachers be part of a team. Student teachers and cooperating teachers all made positive comments about their experiences. The teachers felt that their students benefited from having another student teacher in the room. It is time to rethink how we prepare our student 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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*Figure 1. Interactions in Solo Student Teaching*

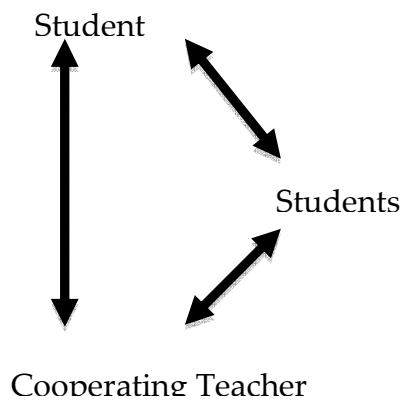


Figure 2. Interactions in Team Student Teaching

