

Gaining fluency: Five practices that mediate effective co-teaching between pre-service and mentor teachers

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Preparing teachers to effectively teach students as well as persist in the profession are among the many goals of teacher education. One of the most critical elements of teacher preparation is the clinical field experience, or teaching practicum (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996; Zeichner, 2010). Teacher education programs in many nations have expanded the length of time and variety of sites in which student teachers are placed (Danyluk, Luhanga, Gwekwerere, MacEwan, & Larocque, 2015; Ingvarson et al., 2014). In United States, new recommendations mandate a minimum of 600 hours in the field in single and multiple subject programs (secondary and primary credential programs) and an additional 150 hours for those seeking a dual credential (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2015).

Despite the central role that field experience plays in teacher preparation, researchers have long acknowledged inherent problems with traditional approaches to student teaching, such as the degree of isolation that student teachers face (McIntyre et al., 1996), insufficient opportunities for student teachers to link theory or program goals to practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), limited opportunities to deepen reflection and inquiry while in the field (Zeichner, 2014), hegemonic relationships between university teacher preparation programs and school partnerships (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Zeichner, 2009), and insufficient mentoring from cooperating teachers (Bacharach, Washut Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010).

Despite these critiques, traditional approaches to student teaching have remained static over the past century in many countries (Gopinathan et al., 2008). Co-teaching has emerged in the literature as a promising instructional practice for learning to teach and for better serving K-12 students. Co-teaching offers an alternative method for preparing teachers that emphasizes situated learning within a framework of collaboration, reflection, and mutual respect (Tobin & Roth, 2005, 2006).

This study examined four years of data on co-teachers in a teacher preparation program in the United States. Co-teachers were pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers participating in a single subject teaching practicum. We utilize activity theory (Leont'ev, 1978) to consider the ways that co-teaching enables participant access to an expanded set of resources (Roth & Tobin, 2005) and a repertoire of discursive tools, artifacts, and division of labor. Our analysis of the data employed Template Analysis as described by Brooks et al (2015) and King (1998). Template Analysis has been used widely in the field of organization research when the research aim is to better understand how a particular system design works in practice (Brooks McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). Findings highlighted how pairs gained fluency, or proficient ways of collaborating, in co-teaching by engaging in five key practices: 1) negotiating difference 2) sharing authority 3) co-mentoring 4) teaching in the moment and 5) co-immersing in real world teaching experiences. As co-teachers moved toward fluency, they reported increases in professional understanding and their abilities to meet the needs of students in their diverse, rural classrooms. Our findings call for a shift in teacher candidate supervision from an evaluative to a coaching model that helps teacher candidates gain expertise around adaptive teaching practices (Soslau et al., 2018).