Best Practices Article:
Gradually Increasing Individuality:
Suggestions for Improving Alternative
Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to examine the use of a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) embedded in a co-teaching framework (Heck & Bacharach, 2016) during the student-teaching portion of an alternative teaching licensure program. The goal was to improve an already existing student-teacher field experience summer residency program at a large Midwestern university by better attending to its desire to help all teachers become better equipped with their selection of teaching strategies.

Keywords: alternative certification, teacher preparation, mentoring, co-teaching

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Background

The billboards are back! All across the country, there has been a re-emergence of billboards urging teachers to apply for jobs in various school districts. Once again, the alarms are going off, warning of the growing teacher shortages and of schools struggling to fill their teacher vacancies (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). In response, state educational departments and university teacher programs have begun to make changes to their existing policies and programs (Aragon, 2016). According to Sutcher, et al. (2016), there was an estimated teacher shortage of 64,000 teachers in 2015. Sutcher, et al. (2016) said, "unless major changes in teacher supply or a reduction in demand for additional teachers occur over the coming years, annual teacher shortages could increase to as much as 112,000 teachers by 2018, and remain close to that level thereafter" (p. 16). Increased teacher retirement, coupled with the challenge of teacher retention is both educationally and financially disastrous for schools. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) found that the high volume in teacher turnover costs school districts over $2.2 billion a year. One common response by states has been to change the parameters for teacher licensing. States have attempted to expedite the process, and enlarge the applicant pool for individuals becoming teachers by removing previous requirements for licensure (Kamenetz, 2014). Alongside this response, universities also have begun to increase the availability of "alternative" teacher licensing programs they offer (Aragon, 2016). For example, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton signed into law a new state alternative teacher certification program in 2011. With bipartisan support, Governor Dayton and his fellow supporters argued that:

> Minnesota needed to be able to cast a wider net to recruit and train top teaching talent, particularly mid-career professionals who didn't want to invest the time it would take to earn a teaching degree from a traditional college or university (McGuire, 2012, para. 3).

The goal of Minnesota's alternative teacher certification program was to recruit more professionals into becoming teachers. Proponents of the legislation said, "an alternative certification program … would reinvigorate the state's teaching ranks and provide another weapon in attacking the achievement gap between white and minority students" (McGuire, 2012, para. 3). After the legislation passed, Minnesota had only one alternative licensing program. Six years later, Minnesota currently has 11 distinct alternative licensing programs (Minnesota Board of Teaching, 2015).

Another problem widely identified and attended to is the issue of teacher retention and ways to shrink the alarming rates of teacher exodus. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) found that about 13 percent of teachers, which is about half a million teachers every year, either change schools or change professions every year. Research has shown that students do worse on standardized tests in reading and mathematics in years when teacher turnover rates were high (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). In fact, Ronfeldt, et al. (2013) found there is a disruptive impact of teacher turnover beyond changes to teacher quality. In other words, the act of teacher turnover has an adverse effect on schools regardless of the quality of teacher who leaves. In particular, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) study found teacher turnover is especially high among beginning teachers, with 40 to 50 percent leaving the profession after five years. In response, schools have begun to focus more attention to induction supports for beginning teachers. According to Ingersoll, "The percentage of teachers that get some kind of induction has

doubled over the last couple of decades" (as cited in Phillips, 2015, para. 19). Collectively, research highlights a variety of needs that must be met in order for beginning teachers to continue teaching. Teachers need: equal support, especially in high needs schools (Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004), emotional support (Odell & Ferraro, 1992) to feel successful (Fluckiger, McGlamery, & Edick, 2006), and to develop desire and persistence to continue teaching (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, & Burke, 2013). Studies have also shown that having a mentor in the same field as a beginning teacher reduced the risk of leaving in the first year by 30 percent (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012). In particular, studies have found that mentoring with relation to collegial support equaled lower rates of turnover in beginning teachers (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006).

These studies reinforce the specific and unique needs beginning teachers have when entering and remaining in the profession. In the noise and rush to fill classrooms with teachers, new problems are created when short term solutions are prioritized over long term improvements. Making teaching a more attractive profession to a wider audience, or lowering the standards to becoming a teacher, might ease fears over classroom shortages, but, "if teachers are hired without having been fully prepared, the much higher turnover rates that result are costly in terms of both dollars spent on the replacement process and decreases in student achievement in high-turnover schools" (Sutcher, et al., 2016, p. 6). While it is helpful to look at ways to increase the teacher pool, and help support the retention of teachers who are already in the classroom, we must not forget to look at the importance of teacher preparation programs and the unique supports needed for preservice teachers, especially in alternative licensing programs.

Preservice teachers and their future students are becoming more diverse (Krummel, 2013). As states and universities continue to draw a wider net for potential teachers, teacher licensing programs, who are creating or expanding their alternative routes to becoming a teacher, will need to acknowledge and respond to the growing diversity of candidates that will be looking to them for support and guidance in their quest to becoming teachers. Teacher preparation programs provide this support through coordinated clinical experiences and university coursework, and "how teacher candidates use both when they enter teaching may be one of the strongest characteristics of preparation programs" (DeMonte, 2015, p. 10). This fusion of coursework and classroom teaching experience has been the standard approach (Wentz, 2001) to student teaching since the 1920s (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). According to Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2010), while the earlier method of teacher preparation relied on the "sink or swim" model, current programs have begun to utilize co-teaching as a way to support preservice teachers gradually during their student teaching.

Theoretical Perspective

The purpose of this article was to examine the use of a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) embedded in a co-teaching framework (Heck & Bacharach, 2016) during the student-teaching portion of an alternative teaching licensure program. The goal was to improve an already existing student-teacher field experience summer residency program at a large Midwestern university by better attending to its desire to help all teachers become "fluent, flexible, and self-regulated [in their] selection and use from a repertoire of strategies –

namely, successful transfer of learning for comprehension [in their understanding of teaching]" (Wiggins, 2015, para. 12).

The author has chosen to take up the challenge set forth by Vagle (2012) and engage with his first plea to educators to "move away from a developmentally responsive vision to a contingently and recursively relational vision" (p. 12). Vagle (2012) argued that schooling of young people is too often blinded by assumptions that prioritize developmental stages over "seeing young adolescents in innumerable, lived (de-naturalized) contexts" (p. 20). The author draws a parallel critique of stage development connecting Vagle's (2012) critique on how schooling of adolescents assumes a certain universal set of norms when it comes to child development with a similar assumption toward the development of preservice teachers. Often, the idea of stage development is applied to preservice teachers and their assumed needs and stages of growth. This assumption is most evident in the way preservice teachers are inducted into the profession through a clinical co-teaching experience, with preservice teachers being partnered with cooperating teachers as their mentors.

In order to confront the pervasiveness of stage development, the article highlights two theorists and their beliefs in the need for individuality to be recognized and honored. Gadamer (1975) wrote about the concept, *fore-meaning,* as it related to the uniqueness of each individual in making meaning. Gadamer (1975) said, "all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text" (p. 271). Bakhtin (1993), wrote about *answerability*, or the obligated uniqueness each person has to themselves and others. Bakhtin (1993) argued, "uniqueness...is compellingly obligatory… everyone occupies a unique and never-repeatable place, any being is once-occurrent" (p. 40). Gadamer's (1975) concept of *fore-meaning* and Bakhtin's (1993) concept of *answerability* are useful theoretical tools to both see and respond to each individual teacher candidate as a unique person with unique experiences, strengths, and needs, as a way to push against the creation of programmatic developmental norms, assumptions, and expectations. By utilizing a critical stance on the normative assumptions of development, the author will attempt to explicate the ways in which development is at work in an alternative teacher licensure program as a means to offer insights for other programs around the country.

Methodology

Guided by these two theoretical concepts, the question for this article was as follows: How might the theoretical concepts of Gadamer (1975) and Bakhtin (1993) be used to reconceive the utilization of the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model in a co-teaching environment designed to support the growth of preservice teachers?

Data came from an alternative licensing program at a large Midwestern university. This was conducted during the summer of 2015, when 30 elementary education preservice teachers enrolled in an alternative licensing program began university coursework and student teaching. The GRR model was the framework for the summer residency program as it related to the use of co-teaching in the clinical student-teaching placements. The summer residency program was divided into three distinct parts and lasted nine weeks. Part I focused on developing a teacher identity, understanding the local context, and foundations of teaching coursework. Part II offered

a space for application and testing of practices through a supported field experience. Part III was designed to support synthesis, reflection, and planning forward.

Using Gadamer's (1975) *fore-meaning* and Bakhtin's (1993) *answerability*, the author analyzed the structure of the first week of Part II. During Part II of summer residency, preservice teachers (teacher candidates) worked with experienced cooperating teachers (teaching mentors) and received individualized coaching support from a university supervisor (university mentor), which helped to support the link between daily instructional practice and research and theory from their graduate coursework. This co-teaching experience in Part II was designed to provide a concrete link between the theoretical knowledge learned in Part I (and continued in Part II) with the experience of designing, facilitating, and reflecting on daily classroom instruction in a supportive setting using scaffolding.

The goal of the program's first week of student teaching (Part II) was to provide opportunities to build relationships between preservice teachers and their students by helping build classroom culture, create routines, and establish guidelines and expectations for students while "seeing" what a complete teaching day looked like. Teaching mentors served as the lead for the planning and teaching during this week with the very important role of modeling their instructional planning and design decisions with teacher candidates during the co-planning process. During the first week, research focused on the experiences of the teacher candidates and data was gathered from multiple sources. Data included daily conversations with teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. Daily observations were also conducted by the researcher throughout the entire five-week student teaching portion of the summer residency program.

After examining the data from the first week of Part II through the lens of Gadamer's (1975) *fore-meaning* and Bakhtin's (1993) *answerability,* the study found three potential "openings," or opportunities for a reimagined program design. Here are three opportunities/questions to consider in which revision could occur:

1. How might our understanding of *fore-meaning* influence the types of questions that are asked of candidates in pre-residency surveys? What should programs do with this information?
2. What would it look like to acknowledge our inherent bias toward traditional models of teacher development based on the perceived past and future of the candidates, and instead recognize our teachers in the present while allowing for more possibilities and places of individualized support?
3. How could the program better respond to each individual candidate with an "obligation" to honor their uniqueness?

Results

Looking at each question and applying the theories of *fore-meaning* and *answerability*, the questions are "opened-up" for a reimagined and improved alternative teacher preparation program. Here are three reimagined programmatic commitments that might improve the development of the next group of teacher candidates who enter this or other similar programs.

Fore-meaning is Contingent

Based on Gadamer's (1975) theory of *fore-meaning*, one cannot simply rely on one's own *fore-meaning* in analyzing another person or text. This is precisely where the program needs to begin its redesign. Too frequently the program allowed itself to construct an image of a "normal" preservice teacher in order to create systems of support. In doing so, the program failed to let the actual candidates "speak" to them. For example, during the first week of student teaching, while some teacher candidates reported that their teaching experiences were lacking substance, as if their natural instincts were being blocked in order to follow a set of daily expectations, others voiced concern that they needed more time to practice skills. One teacher candidate said, "I am very comfortable being around kids and getting to know them, but I need a lot more help with designing lesson plans." This candidate, who did have extensive nonacademic experience working with children, was being supported in a manner not best suited to the candidate's needs. The task for programs is to find balance between programmatic expectations and individual teacher candidate's needs.

This task is paramount to recognizing each individual candidate because as Gadamer (1975) wrote, "[this] is obviously not a matter of a single, 'conscientious' decision, but is 'the first, last, and constant task'" (p. 269). In other words, programs need to meet each candidate where they are before they start teaching, and begin to form individual plans of support based around them. Obtaining more information about teacher candidates to ascertain their "funds of knowledge" (Vygotsky, 1978) can allow programs more insight into their candidate's previous experiences with teaching, working with students, and collaborating with adults in professional learning situations. One way to recognize the importance of a contingent program design would be to create pre-residency surveys that could be collected and analyzed to better design a more individualized program for each candidate.

The GRR Model through a Recursive and Temporal Lens

In recognizing the uniqueness of each candidate, the program must take the initial model for GRR, first used in summer 2015, which was too simple and assumptive, and go deeper into what it means to be a teacher by engaging in the act of teaching on a recursive level. While using a GRR model for teacher development does limit the availability of possible outcomes, experiences, and expectations, it can be adjusted to allow for more possibilities and places of support. Gadamer (1975) wrote of this possibility when he talked about time and distance. "Temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully.... [and]… new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning" (p. 298). In other words, "temporal distance" is not about overcoming our prejudices, but is about recognizing them and using that recognition to fuel new possibilities of understanding. For example, the GRR framework leaned heavily toward teacher candidates working on three aspects of teaching: student interactions, lesson planning, and instruction/assessment.

One possible change programs could make when using a co-teaching model is to be more explicit with candidates when they are being asked to engage in particular aspects of co-teaching. For example, when teacher candidates are primarily observing their cooperating teacher, what

exactly are they observing? How are they deciding what to watch, ask questions about, replicate, and challenge in their own future teaching? In supporting teacher candidates, it is helpful to recognize the importance of communication and transparency through the act of making thinking visible. For preservice teachers, this action occurs on three levels. First, there is much to gain from having cooperating teachers share insights into explaining their actions and instructional decisions. Second, through practice, teacher candidates can begin to share their own understandings, misconceptions, observations, and feelings. Third, these skills can then be shared by beginning teachers to their future students (McLean, 2012).

Answerability is Relational

Lastly, it is not enough to acknowledge the inherent uniqueness in each and every individual, and then continue to design support around a progression of development based on an assumption of universal needs. Do teachers really develop in a linear, or "staged" fashion, improving one skill after the next, always checking off a new box of growth? The answer is "no." Teachers do not have a consistent step-by-step development within themselves, or in relation to their colleagues. Bakhtin (1993) said, "everyone occupies a unique and never-repeatable place, any being is once-occurrent" (p. 40). This means that in every action taken, there is a "never-repeatable" action that only the teacher can create. While teachers are in the beginning intersections of their own development, they are creating never repeatable acts that begin to grow their teacher identity and thus foster their individual development. For a program to support each individual candidate, it must act with an obligation to honor that candidate's once-occurrent presence in the present, while simultaneously recognizing that a once-occurrent event is a product of all the events in a person's life. Simply put, programs need to place the responsibility for "developmental" support on their ability to interact with each candidate equitably.

Educational Importance

Teachers develop and change over time, but this change and development does not occur in universal stages. There is a need to fundamentally change the way programs use the GRR model with co-teaching and pivot from a large scale, universally normed programmatic structure, toward an individualized, responsive, and flexible utilization of GRR. University programs need to help foster an increase in individuality by creating spaces that recognize the individual teacher and support the creation of a community of learners who are both *living* in university teacher education programs, and learning how to support, excite, challenge, and ultimately provide rich educational opportunities of learning for all their students.

If we truly wish to achieve the promise of equitable educational opportunities for all students, we must not neglect the need for preservice teachers to also be given an equitable opportunity to develop a pedagogy that represents their uniqueness. What if programs were to move away from the idea of preparation in an "additive" sense, where alternative teacher education programs seek to find and relay best practices to teacher candidates and instead conceptualize teaching as "adaptive," where teachers learn to confront historical inequities in our educational system with an eagerness to serve all learners and an appreciation of the ever-changing contextual realities of their classrooms?

Related to this perspective is found in Aguilar (2013):

> Although art may seem magical, sometimes effortless, and perhaps impossible to replicate, it requires scientific knowledge and skills. The end product may be a delightful surprise … but a great deal of intention, planning, thought, and knowledge lie deeply embedded within the outcome (p. xii).

Teacher preparation programs can create both a structure of support that is embedded with core principles around pedagogy and practice and still be intentional around creating the space that allows for the unknown, *never-repeatable* moments of individual development to occur.

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