Staging Co-teaching: An Investigation of College Faculty Leading a Course on Collaboration for Inclusion

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Abstract

The following qualitative auto-ethnographic study examined the experience of two co-teaching faculty, one in childhood education and one in special education, as they planned and implemented a co-teaching model to prepare teacher candidates for inclusion. As a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), schools have implemented a greater number of inclusion settings and co-teaching models. This rise in co-teaching opportunities has increased the probability of new teacher candidates being placed in collaborative settings for their fieldwork experiences, student teaching placements, and eventually paid teaching positions.

There has been little research about how college instructors prepare teacher candidates for co-taught settings. Methods were reviewed by comparing and contrasting data, revealing trends as well as the confirmation of beliefs and practices. The main themes that emerged included the following: "Building Relationships", "Implementing a Co-teaching Pedagogy", "Modeling of Co-teaching Pedagogy", "Negotiating Roles, Responsibilities and Parity while Co-teaching", and "Setting the Stage and Using Space". The results of this study indicate that co-teaching faculty in a school of education who demonstrate and model how they negotiate building a relationship, roles and responsibilities, co-teaching pedagogy, and staging and space, provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to see co-teaching in action and provide opportunities to reflect upon, practice and better understand the complexities of co-teaching for faculty as well as for teacher candidates.

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the experience of two co-teaching faculty: one in childhood education and one in special education, as they developed and implemented a co-teaching model to prepare teacher candidates for inclusion. This study examined a model for teacher candidates learning about the necessary elements for an effective co-teaching relationship in an inclusive classroom. Voltz and Elliot (1997) found a discrepancy between the actual preparation and the ideal preparation for collaborative inclusion that teacher educators would like to provide for pre-service level teacher candidates. They recommend that instructors of special education and elementary education methods teach collaboration and model efforts to co-plan and co-teach.

Future educators should have first-hand experience in collaborative planning and consultation with other professionals who may have a different educational lens. The research offered the teacher candidates an opportunity to see firsthand the modeling of co-teaching practices and how they may adapt those lessons and experiences when working with children identified with special needs.

Purpose of the Study

School law and implementation of inclusive practices have impacted how special education services are delivered and with whom special education and general education teachers instruct in elementary classrooms in the 21st Century USA. Inclusion continues to be a major challenge for most schools across the country. There is great debate about the effectiveness of inclusion and whether students identified with special needs have equal or greater success in inclusive classrooms than resource rooms. The difficulty is that few teachers have been adequately trained to work collaboratively or to teach in co-teaching situations (Pugach and Johnson, 2002).

To date, research efforts have focused primarily on co-teaching experiences from the elementary school setting, and co-teachers' perspectives of those elementary classrooms, but few are from a college faculty perspective. Little is known about how higher education instructors negotiate co-teaching as a way to teach and promote co-teaching.

This auto-ethnographic study describes the experiences of two instructors in a school of education who co-taught for the first time in a course devoted to co-teaching among other collaboration topics. The study took place in an undergraduate special education methods course.

One section of the course, which is traditionally taught by a single instructor, was taught by two instructors. The purpose of the study was to explore through the collection of multiple data the impressions and experiences of co-teaching faculty regarding how they prepared teacher candidates for inclusive settings.

Related Literature

According to Cook and Friend (1995), co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals jointly deliver substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space. Co-teaching means both professionals are coordinating and delivering substantive instruction, and both teachers have active roles (Gately and Gately, 2001).

Co-teaching does not mean two adults are present in a classroom at the same time or that the general education teacher plans and delivers all the lessons while the special education teacher circulates. Co-teaching allows teachers to better meet the diverse needs of students with a lower teacher-student ratio and expands the professional expertise applied to student needs (Hourcade and Bauwens, 1995).

There are advantages and disadvantages of co-teaching. The main advantage is that teacher candidates get to observe two experienced faculty teachers planning and teaching together. The presence of different practicing teachers with diverse styles and strengths lets teacher candidates get twice the support, resources and feedback. It is beneficial having a second teacher in the room to plan, manage behavior, and share ideas and resources to meet the varied needs of the teacher candidates.

Some disadvantages to co-teaching are that some teachers are more comfortable working alone and putting another teacher in the room can be challenging when forced. Co-teaching requires communication and a working partnership between the teaching professionals and administration. Both teachers have to share a common philosophy and approach to the instructional process.

Creating classrooms where teacher candidates can see two college faculty modeling co-teaching provides an opportunity to witness collaborative models first hand and discuss how co-teaching is negotiated. Darling-Hammond (1994) suggests that pre-service teachers should be placed in college and university programs similar to the tested medical models or teaching hospitals: learning experiences that can provide rigorous study, dialogue with master teachers, and in-depth interactions with children, families, and colleagues. These clinical experiences would engage pre-service teachers in problem solving, observations, and studies of student learning, which would enable them to develop into reflective practitioners. Teacher candidates need time to reflect on the various roles and responsibilities teachers have in inclusive classrooms.

This research study was an auto-ethnographic study of a pre-service course that included modeling, reflective dialogue, defining the roles and responsibilities of co-teaching by college faculty in a teacher education program, and attempting to foster recommended practices for co-teaching in teacher candidates. A similar description of one collaborative partnership has been written by Kluth and Straut (2003), two professors in a pre-service, inclusive teacher education program in upstate New York. They implemented a collaborative model of teaching for four consecutive semesters. One specializes in the area of significant disabilities and the other has expertise in general education curriculum and instruction. Their model was developed and implemented in two core courses they taught collaboratively. They believed that by providing a collaborative model for candidates, they would be preparing teachers to function in diverse and progressive classrooms.

Both Kluth and Straut acknowledge that they were in a unique situation where there were few barriers to their collaboration. They teach in a program that stresses practices and values of inclusive education and they had administrative support for their work. They understand that colleagues in their own university as well as other institutions of higher education nationwide are interested in co-teaching, but struggle to do so because of social, financial, logistical, or ideological difficulties. This reality parallels the logistical difficulties with co-teachers in K-12 schools.

Another study that examines a collaborative model where a general education faculty member and a special education faculty member deliver coursework through a teaming model is called, "Collaborative Infusion" by Voltz (2005). "Collaborative Infusion" is defined as an approach that 'infuses' special education content throughout a teacher preparation program, rather than housing it in a separate course. Special education faculty and general education faculty deliver the coursework through a teaming model. Voltz examined collaborative infusion approaches in teacher preparation programs across the country.

The studies thus far have discussed and demonstrated that co-teaching in pre-service education courses help teacher candidates develop a realistic understanding of the strengths and challenges of the co-teaching model (Kluth and Straut, 2003), and that co-teaching in pre-service programs is an emerging trend (Voltz, 2005).

The research of Hwang and Hernandez (2002) also shows the growing awareness of co-teaching as an effective pedagogical tool in institutions of higher education.

Hwang and Hernandez (2002) organized a collaborative practice model and examined elementary teacher education students' thoughts, feelings and attitudes about university co-teaching. The researchers gathered data through formal and informal evaluations, overall perceptions of team teaching approaches and the students' understanding of course concepts and learning environments. The co-teaching effort was organized in a collegial structure where both professors worked together to teach an educational psychology course. They researched the topic of team teaching and committed to following a model designed by Bennet, Ishler, and O'Laughlin (1992).

They met once a week during the winter quarter to plan the team teaching course. After reviewing the curriculum, they specified goals and objectives and designed the syllabus, and course projects. Schedules were coordinated based upon the expertise of each faculty member. Both were present in every class, and formal and informal evaluations were administered.

Another study demonstrating a teaching partnership was conducted by Sprague and Pennell (2000). Sprague and Pennell (2000), two university faculty members at Christopher Newport University, and school personnel at a Middle School in Newport News Virginia created a pilot preparation program for pre-service teachers with a focus on inclusive classrooms. This was a result of feedback from program graduates feeling ill-prepared for the inclusive settings they were being employed in as novice teachers. University students received information about collaborative teaching presented by teachers who co-taught. The results showed that a concerted effort to prepare pre-service teachers for co-teaching can be enhanced when schools and universities work together.

Research Methodology

This qualitative auto-ethnographic methods study was initially designed as a case study but adjustments were made as it became more aligned with the design of an auto-ethnography, where I, acting as a full member in the research group or setting, engaged in a continuous cycle of data collection (Anderson, 2006).

The study was conducted during the spring 2008 semester, co-teaching a course titled Collaboration for Inclusion, that provided an opportunity to capture the experiences of two co-teaching faculty, as we taught pre-service candidates the methods of co-teaching. Qualitative research allows the researcher to make knowledge claims based on constructivist perspectives or participatory perspectives (Creswell, 2003).

Instrumentation and Procedure

To obtain as complete a picture as possible of the participants' case study, the researchers employed multi-modal methods and approaches. A variety of data collection instruments were used to ensure better understanding and greater credibility of the findings (Merriam, 1998). Yin (1984) suggests six sources of evidence for data collection in the case study protocol: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Not all need to be employed in every case study. I used these sources as evidence for data collection in this study including participant observation, interactive interviews, videotaping and field notes.

An inductive analysis and the constant comparative method were chosen as the process for refining categories and deriving themes, patterns or trends for this study from the collected data of discussions of our class sessions while reviewing videotape as well as my personal field notes. Results from the methods were reviewed by comparing and contrasting data, revealing trends as well as the confirmation of beliefs and practices in the data.

Findings

The results of this study indicate that co-teaching faculty in a school of education can demonstrate and model how they negotiate building a relationship, roles and responsibilities, co-teaching pedagogy, and staging and space. **Table 1** provides professors of teacher education and teacher candidates with the opportunity to see co-teaching in action. Reflections, practice and understandings of the complexities of co-teaching for faculty as well as for our teacher candidates appear in **Table 1**.

Table 1 represents the major themes and their operational definitions including the positive and negative experiences related to each theme.

Building a relationship throughout the semester by meeting and communicating frequently enabled us to co-plan co-teaching activities that involved the use of demonstrations and "think alouds".

We were able to make explicit our observations and improve practice as we observed films of our co-teaching. Our commentary about the films of our co-teaching efforts helped us to improve our own practice and realize how much training our student teachers needed to become effective co-teachers.

Table 1
Co-teaching Themes, Definitions and Positives and Negatives

Theme and Operational Definition	Positives	Negatives
Relationship Building Operational Definition-The progression of the attachment that formed between the faculty as they co-taught the course.	• Earned trust and respect for each other's knowledge and experiences • Network expands by two • New perspective and lens • Trust evolved as we learned more about each other personally and professionally • We let the students be a part of our developing relationship by sharing our experiences	• We were strangers. Had to get to know each other during the experience, not prior to the experience. Early on she called me the wrong name. Students knew me better than she did. • Prior relationships with teacher candidates and speakers from Advocacy Center may cause favoritism or a familiarity that one has vs. the other
Modeling of Co-Teaching Pedagogy Operational Definition- To produce a representation or simulation of a co-teaching model.	• Reflective teaching • Providing a living model to examine and reflect upon • Visible and visual model • Parallels real teaching experiences • Able to watch the turnover of responsibility and joint agreements • Able to think aloud and share our experiences as they unfold • Frame our experiences in the lens of co-teaching and collaboration • Provide a variety of Friend, Cook and Reisings Co-teaching models and how to plan and prepare when using them • Heightened awareness of the varied models. A balcony view. • Able to articulate and demonstrate commitment to planning together and negotiating who does or says what and when.	• May limit themselves to using only the models teacher candidates observed and practiced • Need greater time to model two different approaches to the same content and then have teacher candidates compare • Discrepancy from what we are modeling to struggling co-teaching settings in schools they do their field work in.
Negotiation of Roles, Responsibilities and Parity while Co-Teaching Operational Definition- The duty and obligation to perform a part or a function within a particular process.	• Both able to check for understanding/assess • Create and structure organization of class • Model negotiation of roles, passing the chalk, time allotment, assigned duties, and distribution of materials • Commitment to co-planning • Voice-who says what, when • Found a common language • Bounce/Ping ideas off each other • Routines and rituals are established, what we do at start and end of class are a result of class commitments we created together • Agenda posted, allotted times and time management and pacing • Develop class ground rules together • Teacher/student ratio • Assigned jobs • Utilize each others strengths/ideas/lens • One manages while one instructs • Second pair of ears/eyes • Ability to check/clarify/cue each other • Trust • Learning alongside our candidates	• Unbalanced work load between co-teachers • Dominant vs. Submissive Roles • Comfort level of sticking to traditional roles of generalist and specialist • Letting go of responsibility and ownership • Lens is focused on teacher to student interactions only and not on teacher to teacher interactions • Hidden hierarchy-experience, special educator vs. content specialist • Lack of accountability • Dominant personality • Uncomfortable taking lead when it is unfamiliar • Both professor names listed on handout • Grading difference

Table 1 (Cont'd.) Co-teaching Themes, Definitions and Positives and Negatives

Setting the Stage and Using Space Operational Definition- The arrangement of the two instructors as far as distance between each other, teacher candidates and their materials within the classroom setting.	• Fluid Positioning of teachers as we moved from team teaching to individual facilitator to a co-teaching model • Negotiate where we are in the room to guide teacher candidate focus • Moving up and down stage provided cues to co-teacher when they wanted to speak or pass the chalk • Model postures and organization of materials and easel • Demonstrate transitions • Provide greater accessibility, proximity to teacher candidates • Increased awareness of where we are in the room in order to bounce or ping off each other	• Distractions • Learn to maximize or minimize movement • Lack of synchronization • Figure out if and where you fit • Get in each others way/stepping on toes • Detract attention and standing still can be challenging
Co-teaching Pedagogy Operational Definition- The field of study that deals with the methods of teaching and learning co-teaching.	• Time Allotment-setting time allotments and pace for each class • Learned through progression of classes each others teaching styles and strengths • Give and take between instructors, flexibility, trust • Create a common co-teaching vocabulary and verbal and non-verbal cues • Multi-task-one shows prop while other describes its purpose and use • Effective use of humor, similar sense of humor • Cues-we demonstrated a variety of visual, verbal and non-verbal cues that co-teachers can use when co-teaching • Began to mirror each other and blend our styles created a fluid team • Use of voice, proximity and staging to manage candidate behavior. • Overtly shared when we managed the class by proximity. If a group was noisy either one of us could move in close and redirect them.	• Limits on teachable moments and flexibility • Inability to get through all the material in the allotted time when flexible and teachable moment occurs • Unequal roles and time "on stage" or facilitating • Increased time commitment for co-planning • No longer working in isolation, must be sensitive to schedules and conflicts • Turning over of responsibility • Visual cues can be confusing-need to be clear to teacher candidates who they should be directing their attention to. • Began to mirror each other and blend our styles and lose some of our individual style • At times it was hard to frame everything in the lens of a co-teacher and at times it was the lens of a general education teacher.

Table 2 presents our co-teaching commentaries as we observed our own films of our co-teaching efforts.

This is the first time we talked about creating simulations of co-teaching models as a part of our planning and instructional practice.

As a result we began to plan in a whole new way using the Friend, Cook and Reising's (1993) co-teaching models as our framework. This occurred early in the research while we were planning for our second week. Had we not been experienced educators we might not have used the metacognitive strategies and taken a 'balcony view' of our experiences.

Marlene and I might have missed or not reached the 'aha' moment about using the co-teaching models to deliver the course content much later in the course if we had not been trying to be reflective practitioners.

By the fifth session Marlene and I were working more cohesively as a team. In my field notes afterward I noted:

> "Our conversations flowed smoothly and we both felt at ease extending each other's ideas. We used space better and were not a distraction by moving back and forth in front of each other locating materials. We are starting to learn each other's teaching style and pace."

Table 2 Participant comments based upon reviews of our filmed co-teaching efforts
I said while viewing videotape session one: "I think the more we can make it clear, overt, explicit, and specific as to what are those practices that two people do when they are in a co-teaching role including those things they do not see us do behind the scenes, will help inform teacher candidates. As instructors we must clearly "think aloud" so that they know that it takes planning, flexibility, compromise and establishing roles and responsibilities in addition to what they are seeing modeled."
Marlene reflected from videotape session two: "I like the way that we've both been receptive to bouncing off each other's ideas and kind of playing off the strengths of each other. Since I haven't done this content umpteen times, it's nice to hear some of your ideas for playing with the content differently. You know what I mean, like just the introduction of the literature reading, I would have never thought of that. I would have thought of reading something that wasn't children's literature. I liked that and the students liked it, obviously."
In session two Marlene said: "I think when the teacher candidates start in with their family presentations and we have a little bit of time to plan, we might start thinking ahead about our co-teaching and whether we can simulate the models. That is an 'aha' moment for me right now. Why aren't we always talking about the models of co-teaching when planning our co-teaching class sessions for the candidates?"
I said while viewing videotape session five: "There has got to be a point where students are confronted with the reality of co-teaching. Right now there may not be many good examples of co-teaching in schools. It may be that either they're doing it truly as partners using team teaching, station teaching, parallel and some alternative teaching models, or they are saying they are team teaching but they are really taking turns instructing, or they are moving throughout two different physical spaces. Students are going to come to a point where they are going to realize they learned about one scenario and then see something very different in schools. We want them to make a shift where they do not embrace what is currently going in schools if co-teaching and collaborative efforts have been unsuccessful."
Marlene said while reviewing videotape session five: "One thing I noticed is that it seems more relaxed, our back-and-forth between each other, the dialogue that we are having, that kind of pinging effect and passing of the chalk and taking turns. We're communicating openly about the class and we have shared responsibility for planning. We use humor and the important thing, too, is we are using several different ways of measuring the students' progress, which is good."
I reflected while viewing videotape session six: "They know that co-teaching is this commitment to planning together, to deciding who is going to say what when. It takes open communication negotiating those roles and responsibilities. I think our prowess together as co-teachers has evolved as we learn to trust each other. I share with you that I've let the ego go and know that I do not have to control everything or feel the obligation to teach everything. Now I have another expert in the room and I have that trust in you. I understand that the students are going to have an exciting learning experience, even though I am not leading it. And at times I may be the facilitator, the assistant or leader of a small group, but other times I may be quiet and that is the role needed at that time."

Conclusions

We learned from modeling co-teaching practices for the teacher candidates, filming and analyzing our own co-teaching efforts to appreciate the complexity of co-teaching. We shared observations of our co-teaching efforts with our students and when they modeled co-teaching for us, we were able to share open and constructive criticism.

We shared our experiences as we negotiated roles, responsibilities and parity so that teacher candidates could gain understanding as to how we made co-teaching work. We modeled co-teaching methods and groupings so that teacher candidates had an opportunity to see them live and practice these methods prior to their student teaching semester. We discussed space and staging with each other as new co-teachers and with the teacher candidates as well.

We arranged ourselves, teacher candidates and our materials according to which co-teaching model we were demonstrating. Overall, we concluded that co-teaching had to be practiced live, filmed and critiqued to improve the practice.

Recommendations

Implications for future research as a result of this study include suggestions for more empirical studies for teacher candidates and co-teaching practitioners. Future research is needed that compares the teaching of a course on co-teaching using a single instructor model versus one co-taught using two instructors.

Research is needed to see how co-teachers negotiate the other teacher roles when modeling. Future studies may also want to look at the co-teaching relationship and what occurs over time as they continue to co-teach through a number of semesters or years.

Kluth and Straut (2003) recommend that researchers explore how student learning is affected when college teachers co-teach and engage in other types of collaboration including: actions, decisions in the field and what aspects of instructor collaboration have the biggest effect on student behaviors and decisions related to co-teaching.

Co-instructors may benefit from gathering data using Gately and Gately's Co-Teaching Rating Scale or adopting a common co-teaching vocabulary, negotiation of roles, responsibilities, parity and use of staging, space and a cueing system.

It would also be interesting to gather the teacher candidates' perceptions of the impact of the modeling demonstrations and whether they implemented them during their student teaching placements as well as to gather data from the school based educators and their perceptions of the teacher candidates' efficacy on co-teaching and collaboration.

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