

Developing and Using a Co-Teaching Model within a Middle Level Education Program

Ellis Hurd

Illinois State University



Gary Weilbacher

Illinois State University



Abstract

Middle level educational frameworks have historically used collaborative forms of teaching. Exemplary middle schools use interdisciplinary teaming which often involves some level of co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing. In addition to this collaborative foundation, federal mandates for supporting students have led to frequent co-teaching between special educators, bilingual/bicultural specialists, and regular classroom teachers. This increased attention to differentiated instruction and curriculum demands that incoming professionals be proficient in meeting the needs of every student. Given that middle level educational frameworks, current inclusion practices, and demands for differentiation are all dependent upon teachers working together, increasing the presence of co-teaching within middle level teacher education program is both pragmatically sound and connected to foundational theories of middle level education. Middle school teachers and university faculty members who engage in co-teaching with teacher candidates can provide candidates with practical experiences tied closely to the work that will be expected of them as public-school teachers. Early exposure to co-teaching models can better equip our students for their future work in today's schools. This study critically explores the professional growth possible from the implementation of a co-teaching model within a middle level education program. Potential benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching for middle level teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and university faculty are explored. The results of this study may provide a unique framework of co-teaching which enhances interactions among educational constituents for improved teacher preparation, professional development for practicing teachers, and improved instruction for middle grades students.

Developing and Using a Co-Teaching Model within a Middle Level Education Program

As middle level teacher educators, we believe our main task is to help prepare our teacher candidates to not only function effectively in schools for young adolescents but to also implement practices that are founded on middle grades ideals (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). One foundational practice in middle schools involves using collaborative forms of teaching (Beane, 1997; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Vars, 1993). To ensure the implementation of collaborative teaching, exemplary middle schools use interdisciplinary teaming which is characterized by co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing with two or more teachers coming from different subject areas (Beane, 1997; Conderman, 2011; Hurd, 2013). By requiring our teacher candidates to have endorsements in two subject areas, we provide them with the knowledge they need to make basic interdisciplinary connections and the flexibility to contribute to interdisciplinary teams. However, placed in clinical sites, the actual amount of collaboration candidates experience depends entirely on the willingness of their cooperating teacher to work collaboratively. In other words, we may not be doing enough to prepare them how to collaborate and co-teach with others, and this skill seems to be an essential component of schools today.

In addition to this collaborative foundation within middle schools, the need for co-teaching is tied to federal mandates supporting students with disabilities as well as mandates tied to teacher education, in general. As caseloads for special education teachers continue to rise and with more students with disabilities enter the regular education setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. xxvii), the need for co-teaching is considerable. The increased attention to differentiated instruction and curriculum demands that incoming professionals be proficient in meeting the needs of every student. Furthermore, as mandated by the Council for the

Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, formerly NCATE), it is critical that we continually examine programmatic data concerning the level of preparation of our teacher candidates. We can ensure that programs are meeting or exceeding national recommendations, as well as meeting the needs of the schools and districts seeking to hire graduates, by helping our teacher candidates learn how to collaborate. Most importantly, teachers who are adept at working together can better meet the varied needs of adolescents.

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional educational benefits and drawbacks for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members who engage in co-teaching. In earlier studies, we were able to highlight the benefits of co-teaching for candidates, practicing teachers, and university faculty (Hurd & Weilbacher, 2017) and the professional and personal development and growth we as faculty experienced while co-teaching (Weilbacher & Hurd, 2017). But here, we touch-on the benefits of co-teaching while highlighting its *drawbacks* with those same constituents. Even so, various and increasing educational demands and standards make including the practice of co-teaching within teacher education programs pragmatically sound, especially as co-teaching is connected to foundational theories of middle grades education.

Literature Review

Co-teaching is not new to the field of education. Although one could argue that co-teaching has been around just as long as professional classroom relationships, Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013) place the inception of co-teaching in the 1960s. This inception was tied to efforts of *Progressive Education*. Early studies on the effectiveness of co-teaching, however, did not appear in the research literature until the 1990s with discussions over collaborative models of education (p. 11).

Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013) define co-teaching as “two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching all of the students assigned to a classroom” (p. 4). Beninghof (2012) states that co-teaching is “a coordinated instructional practice” in general classrooms with much time spent on shared responsibilities of planning and reflection. These same researchers also provide information on what co-teaching is not, including teachers working in isolation; one teacher teaching while another tutors (Beninghof, 2012); or a “phenomenon that lends itself to precise investigation” (DLDCEC, 2001, as cited in Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). In other words, while we have exemplars of what is and is not co-teaching, the process of co-teaching itself is natural, unfolding, and difficult to pin down exactly.

Most of the literature tied to co-teaching is connected to the collaboration between regular classroom teachers and special education teachers (Conderman, 2011; Friend & Bursuck, 2011; Heck, Bacharach & Mann, 2010; Miller, 2008; Hildenbrand, 2009; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). However, this research itself is not directly relevant to our study, and there is limited research available regarding the types of co-teaching arrangements utilized in our study (see Hurd & Weilbacher, 2017; and Weilbacher & Hurd, 2017). Accordingly, very limited attention and research has been devoted to the occurrences of co-teaching among middle level teacher candidates, cooperating classroom teachers, and university faculty.

Weilbacher and Tilford (2015) examined the perceptions of teacher candidates and their cooperating teachers regarding co-teaching in a year-long PDS middle grades program. The results indicated that co-teaching deepened the mentoring relationship between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates and was a strong form of teacher preparation, beneficial for middle grades students. Likewise, a study conducted by Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, and Stevens (2009) placed pairs of pre-service teachers with single cooperating

teachers for a 12-week clinical experience. Their research revealed that one of the major problems of this model was related to competition between pre-service teachers. In addition, both the cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers were concerned about becoming co-dependent, losing their individuality, and described confusion regarding classroom management. However, the strengths of this model included mutual learning, professional support, benefits for the K-12 students involved, and noticeable gains in pre-service teacher confidence with ample feedback in teaching.

Given the limited and relevant research to draw upon, we referenced the work from St. Cloud State University (2012) that described models of co-teaching we utilized when working with teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. These models include: *One Teach, One Assist*—one teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other assists students with their work, monitors behaviors, or corrects assignments; *Station Teaching*—the co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts where each teacher instructs one of the groups with groups spending time at each station; *Alternative (Differentiated)*—alternative teaching strategies provide two different approaches to teaching the same information. While the desired learning outcome is the same for all students, the instructional strategy is different; and *Team Teaching*—teachers use well planned, team-taught lessons that exhibit an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority. Using a team teaching strategy, both teachers are actively involved in the lesson.

In addition to the work from St. Cloud University, we also found the work of Badiali and Titus (2012) useful, as they outlined six models of co-teaching: Mentor Modeling; One Teach, One Guide; Station Teaching; Parallel Teaching; Alternative Teaching; and Synchronous Teaming. These models of co-teaching occur between teacher candidates and cooperating

teachers within in a PDS setting. For the purposes of this study, the following co-teaching approaches were used: *One Teach, One Assist*; *Station Teaching*; *Parallel Teaching*; *Alternative (Differentiated) Teaching*; and *Team Teaching*. Each of these four models was explored for its potential educational benefits and drawbacks for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to fully investigate the nuances and activities occurring with co-teaching. With various models of co-teaching between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers, teacher candidates and university faculty, classroom teachers and university faculty, and, at times, all three parties, a qualitative design was the favored methodological approach in order to nature movement in and out of the study to reconstruct the teaching process as a form of inquiry (Hurd, 2012, 2013; Creswell, 1998, 2013).

The data sources used in this study included but were not limited to the following: interviews and focus groups; field notes and classroom observational data; and personal narratives. We used these sources to examine the professional educational benefit and drawback of co-teaching for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members. Interview and focus group data from a convenience sample population of consenting middle grades classroom teachers and their assigned teacher candidates were used as the primary data source for the study. We also included interview data from university instructors and field notes compiled by the authors (university faculty members) during their observations from their respective schools. Finally, on-going conversations between the university faculty members (authors) occurred as a multi-layered data source.

Setting

The participating middle grades schools were in a small urban city within the Midwest. The small city has a population of approximately 130,000 residents. There were two school districts with five middle schools within the area. The city has a minority population of about 20%. The median family income was approximately \$50,000. Surrounding metropolitan areas were conveniently located nearby.

The target schools in the study included Meadow View School and Prairieland Junior High School (all pseudonyms). These schools were selected for their long-standing involvement in and support of the Middle Level Education Program. Meadow View and its teachers have supported the efforts of the program through collaborating and teaching middle level teacher candidates and students. Similarly, PJHS has been involved in the Professional Development School (PDS) program for 13 years and has provided powerful learning experiences for its middle grades students and the teacher candidates who have been placed there.

Meadow View School exists as part of a combined elementary and middle school (K-8) building and is also associated with a 9-12 high school. At the time of study, the total population of the schools was 1,000 students. Of this amount, 390 were enrolled at the K-8 building. The demographic breakdown of Meadow View and its affiliated high school was 9.2% African American students, 5.4% Hispanic students, 7.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan, 7.3% Multi-Racial, and 70.9% Caucasian.

PJHS is part of a unified district which had one area career center high school, one comprehensive high school, one junior high school, and seven elementary schools serving approximately 5,605 students. According the 2015 State of Illinois Interactive Report Card, the enrollment at PJHS was 1,209 students. Demographically, the population was 50.1% White,

25.2% African American, 12.4% Hispanic students, 2.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9.0% bi/multiracial. The free and reduced lunch population at the school was 58.5%.

A total of 9 classroom teachers in grades seven through eight participated in the study. There were also 8 participating middle level teacher candidates. Of this number, 3 candidates at PJHS were paired with three of classroom teachers; whereas 1 was shared by two classroom teachers on the same team. At Meadow View there was a 1-to-1 ratio with 4 candidates and their participating teachers. In addition, one faculty instructor with experience teaching in the traditional course sections and mentorship for the PDS for the middle level education program participated in the study.

Participants

In exploring co-teaching among all teachers' responses (n=9), we found that the distribution of teachers across grade levels at the middle school varied. Accordingly, 44% (n=4) reported working on a 7th grade level team, 100% (n=9) on two 8th grade level teams, and 44% (n=4) reported working at multiple grades or levels¹.

Of the teachers and faculty instructor (n=10) working at all levels, 40% (n=4) identified as male, and 60% (n=6) identified as female. Also, 100% (n=10) identified as White/European American. Of these numbers, 70% (n=7), reported being 40 years of age or younger. Whether age and/or gender of a teacher influences the types and frequency of use of co-teaching was not examined as part of this study; but these factors of influence certainly may play a role in an educator's outlook and educational and workplace identities (Hurd, 2010, 2012).

A strong majority of participating teacher candidates identified as White/European (75%; n=6). One candidate identified as Asian American; whereas another identified as African

¹ Percentages do not total to 100% as teachers indicated working on similar teams and in multiple grade levels/split assignments.

American. Of these numbers, 50% (n=4) of the candidates were part of the senior-block, PDS program; whereas the other 50% (n=4) were part of the junior-block, pre-student teaching clinical class. Yet all the candidates were enrolled as part of the middle level education program at the same time. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Procedures

Data on participants' experiences were collected over one academic year (8-9 months) through two interrelated phases: individual and focus group interviews. Following the procedures of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Wolcott (1994), we gathered field notes during weekly school observations over several weeks. These notes were transcribed and analyzed for distinguishable factors of the teacher candidates' and classroom teachers' experiences. To establish understanding and *transferability* (Shenton, 2004), factors were compared and analyzed through *structural corroboration* (Eisner, 1998).

The interrelated phases involved a minimum of three individual and focus group interviews with teachers. The first one emerged from natural conversations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), followed with an intensive interview which emerged from observations. We then conducted one final focus group interview for member checking to ensure *coherence* (Eisner, 1998) and *rigorous subjectivity* (Wolcott, 1994). Open-ended questions were asked using *holistic analysis* (Yin, 2009), focused on key factors derived from observations. These key factors included the following:

1. What are the professional educational benefits for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members who engage in co-teaching?
2. What do you see as potential drawbacks with co-teaching as a professional development experience?

3. How do you see yourself as a co-teacher? Describe how your colleagues see you?
4. How can higher ed. faculty assist teachers and teacher candidates with school transitions and young adolescents?

For data analysis and representation, Creswell's (2013) *spiral* method was used, a custom-built and learned approach to qualitative research, to investigate the different layers of data on the effectiveness of co-teaching included in the study. Using significant factors from field notes, university faculty member conversations (authors), and interviews, the authors engaged in the process of constructing, deconstructing, and then reconstructing impressions of the data to more fully understand the issues. This method was especially important and useful given the limited research available on co-teaching between middle grades teachers. Specific responses from interviews were analyzed for *patterned regularities in the data* (Creswell, 1998, p. 152). We used these patterns to construct comparisons between each teacher and between the groups of teachers at the different schools for *consensual validation* (Eisner, 1998). Themes emerged *within* and *across* interviews (Chase, 2005) and were compared against that of our own experiences and journeys as faculty in co-teaching and in research (Hurd, 2010, 2012, 2013; Hurd & Weilbacher, 2014).

Findings

General Trends

We investigated the number of years that teachers and the faculty instructor had worked and the number of years they taught at the same level or school(s). One half of the teachers (50%; n=5) reported having worked for 15 years or less in the field, while 50% indicated they had worked in education between 17-22 or more years. Two participants reported having taught for 37 years or more. Regarding the number of years teachers taught at the same school and grade level(s),

nearly all (90%; n=9) of the teachers indicated they had worked at their particular level(s) and in their particular school(s) for 6 or more years. Only one teacher responded with having worked at the current grade levels and in teaching for fewer than five years. The length of time a teacher has taught at a school(s), the grade level(s), or has worked, in general, may influence the educational outlook and use of co-teaching.

The distribution of core-content areas (English language arts, math, science, social studies) along with reading was nearly equal across the two schools. ELA was taught by 33% of the teachers (n=3); math was taught by 22% of teachers (n=2); science and social studies were only represented by one teacher each (11%, respectively); whereas reading was taught by 22% (n=2) of the participating teachers. Of these numbers, two teachers (22%; n=2) reported having taught both ELA and Reading as their content areas.

Co-teacher Identifications

We examined the background perspectives of teachers and candidates and whether or not they identified as co-teachers. When asked, “Do you see yourself as a co-teacher? Describe how your colleagues see you?” one-half of the Meadow View School teachers identified as co-teachers; whereas the other half did not see themselves as “true” co-teachers. A faculty instructor in our program identified as a co-teacher and cited personal experiences having co-taught with a special education teacher. After forum interviews, however, all the teachers from Meadow View concluded that they were not co-teachers, traditionally speaking. That is, the teachers only had three academic units by which they co-planned, co-taught, and co-assessed. Thus, they chose to redefine themselves as collaborative teachers, as they did not consistently co-teach throughout the year (see Hurd & Weilbacher, 2017). Likewise, the conversations with the faculty instructor revealed that even a legitimate identification of being a co-teacher still does not necessarily

translate to being a co-teacher on a middle grades team. In examining teacher candidates' responses, similar findings were found. Of the four students at Meadow View, three identified as co-teachers.

Four of five Prairieland Junior High School teachers saw themselves as co-teachers, and their perspectives were quite different. One never even mentioned co-teaching with his teacher candidate but provided a lengthy description of the co-teaching relationship he had with his special education partner. In contrast, another teacher, Mr. DeMarco (all pseudonyms), focused solely on the co-teaching that took place with Cassie, the teacher candidate who also worked with Mrs. Daniels. There seemed to some disappointment in his description as they were unable to reach what he considered to be his ideal version of co-teaching:

I would like to see myself as a co-teacher in the true sense of the phrase – one who shares all teaching responsibilities in a particular class. In my co-teaching experiences, the other teacher and I communicated this ideal to each other; yet, it was hard to practice in the classroom. Our classes typically fell into a lead teacher/assistant teacher situation.

(personal communication, May 2015)

Mr. DeMarco went on to describe a variety of reasons why his co-taught classes fell short of the ideal, including start time challenges, students not seeing he and his partner as equals, finding time for common planning time. He also mentioned how he would often just use the same plans as his other classes for the co-taught class which would not provide adequate time for the co-teacher to plan how she would help during class. Thus, she was forced into “background” into the teacher/assistant teacher model. Mrs. Dennis focused solely on her co-teaching experiences with teacher candidates and mentioned the value it had for her own professional growth. Each of these Prairieland teachers came to the interviews with different perceptions of

how they see themselves as co-teachers and why they value the experience (for an in-depth analysis of the benefits of co-teaching, see Hurd & Weilbacher, 2017).

The Benefits and Drawback to Co-Teaching

Several benefits of co-teaching were mentioned during participant interviews of teachers, the faculty instructor, and teacher candidates. They were expressed within respective groups (i.e., benefits to teachers, to students, candidates), as well as across group classifications. The overall shared benefits of co-teaching were reported as: (1) better preparation of content and increased opportunities for students; (2) a focus on the needs of middle schoolers with another set of eyes; (3) an increased respect for colleagues; and (4) extended time. The most pronounced idea reported was time. Over and over, participants returned to the concept of increased time for planning, teaching, and assessment as a direct result of co-teaching.

Co-teaching benefits for cooperating teachers. According to the analysis of the interviews with cooperating teachers, co-teaching provided benefits to the teachers, helped their students, and was influential in preparing teacher candidates. *Station Teaching* was one of the co-teaching models used during this study. As stated earlier, it occurs when a co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts where each teacher instructs one of the groups with groups spending time at each station (St. Cloud State University, 2012). By far, station teaching was the favored model and used by more teacher candidates and cooperating teachers at Meadow View for reasons of time: covering more content with less time and more people.

Co-teaching benefits for middle grades students. Another benefit of co-teaching concerned meeting the needs of individual middle grades students. One cooperating teacher remarked that she set up her co-teaching differently than her colleagues in that she had the same mathematics content being taught in all the co-teaching groups. Other important benefits of co-

teaching for middle-grade students included more opportunities for small groups and individualized instruction, re-teaching of concepts to students who may be struggling, and providing occasions for the teacher candidate and the teacher to show the students how the lessons apply to different skills they are working on. Co-teaching also provided flexibility in terms of leaders for students to go to for help. Some students responded better to the teacher candidate than the teacher and preferred to receive help from her while other students preferred the teaching style of the teacher and would continue to seek help from him or her. The teachers had the chance to see how the students respond to different teaching styles and were able to help the teacher candidates reach students who may be struggling with one teaching style.

Co-teaching benefits for teacher candidates. One of the goals of the middle level education program is for its teacher candidates to reach near-equal status to the teacher in the classroom. This is considered a sign of success. Teacher candidates were motivated to work harder and prepare more to earn the near-equal status and to show their cooperating teachers they are prepared and have the same background knowledge on the lesson topic. The teacher candidates also reported wanting to have the same level of knowledge on the topics taught and therefore pushed themselves to learn more about the topics.

The researchers also examined the potential drawbacks of co-teaching. Although minimal drawbacks were mentioned, most participants agreed that the benefits of co-teaching far outweigh the drawbacks. These drawbacks included: (1) unestablished relationships with students; (2) planning time and communication constraints; (3) lack of individual teaching and diminished sense of ownership; (4) lack of common ground and philosophical agreement on management; and (5) distractions and issues with teacher transitions. The most commonly cited drawback included a lack of time or time needed to engage properly in co-teaching.

Co-teaching drawbacks for cooperating teachers. The main drawbacks reported by teachers and the faculty instructor revolved around time to plan, procedural and communication difficulties, and unestablished relationships with students. “I see very few drawbacks. You know the only difficulty is going to be finding time” (Instructor Armstrong, personal communication, October 15, 2014). They cited how these co-planning and co-teaching areas all take a great deal of time and arrangement. cursory approaches to co-teaching would not sufficiently address these areas. It would take concerted efforts and time to properly to construct the rich environments in which middle school students can learn, and this seems to move away from co-teaching.

Co-teaching drawbacks for teacher candidates. Faculty members learned of a hidden drawback with co-teaching. Teacher candidates had not had the opportunity to co-plan with their teachers which was disappointing. Candidates believe the planning process is a large part of their job. They wanted to be evaluated on that portion; not just the activity of teaching. Planning is a critical part of teaching and candidates were not being evaluated on the stage of preparing for lessons. Yet the university program contains courses in planning engaging lessons for classrooms and the teacher candidates would like to be evaluated on their planning process while in the field.

The drawbacks of co-teaching which most concerned teacher candidates included notions very common to their teaching experience at the preservice level. Candidates are naturally the least experienced—in terms of teaching in the classroom—and thus reported drawbacks in reference to individual time to plan and deliver lessons. In addition, they reported a lack of ownership with the lesson and philosophical disagreement with partners. By this, they meant the commonly held practices associated with managing a classroom. They found difficulty in managing classrooms during co-taught lessons / session because of their unease with their partner’s approach and classroom management (or lack thereof).

Candidates also reported that the experience of co-teaching was incomplete because the teachers that they were co-teaching with were still their evaluators. For candidates to be seen as a lead teacher, they really had to work hard to earn it. Cooperating teachers noted that teacher candidates were often timid, nervous, and reluctant. They also noted that the teacher candidates could sense that the candidates were unsure and often were seeking approval from the teacher during lessons. The teachers indicated, in reality, they would have liked candidates to experiment with their own ideas.

Faculty Perspectives and the Value of the “Other” Voice

This experience included the faculty members having switched roles with the cooperating teachers in order to have the opportunity to co-teach with teacher candidates. While the faculty members replaced the teachers in the classroom, teachers were able to observe another classroom and another teacher in various disciplines. This experience gave the faculty a deeper sense of how candidates planned, implemented, and evaluated their lessons in the classroom. It also strengthened the relationships between the faculty members, teachers, and teacher candidates.

Another benefit of the co-teaching experience was that teacher candidates reported a change in their perceptions of involved faculty members. They had connected better with shared experiences and developed a more collegial relationship than the typical student-faculty relationship. The dynamic of the relationships changed from a hierarchal to near-equal status. Candidates thought the experience gave the faculty members credibility in that they were able to go into a classroom and show them what to do rather than just teaching them in a lecture format at the university. This experience allowed the faculty members to feel how candidates might feel when being evaluated. It also demonstrated to candidates that they are not the only people taking

risks in an effort to grow professionally (for an in-depth analysis on personal and professional faculty growth, see Weilbacher & Hurd, 2017).

Helping Educators with Co-teaching

In our study, we also examined how faculty might help teachers and teacher candidates in clinical course experiences. We asked participants questions about school transitions and young adolescents and how university faculty might assist. Several ideas were offered during interviews by teachers, the faculty instructor, and teacher candidates. The overall ideas were reported as: (1) early clinical and co-teaching opportunities for teacher candidates; (2) going beyond observations and the norm by having a focus on co-teaching authenticity with teachers, their students, and the school curriculum; (3) increased faculty and cooperating collaborations and partnerships or reciprocal co-teaching. Overall, co-teaching was a positive experience for the faculty members, candidates, cooperating teachers, and middle school students in the classrooms.

Discussion

Time as a Benefit and Drawback to Co-teaching

It takes a great deal of effort and time from middle grades educators to effectively implement and practice interdisciplinary teaming and curriculum (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 1991, 2010).

In fact, one of the greatest drawbacks of co-teaching concerns time. Every day, teachers are faced with insurmountable challenges and time constraints. They are constantly divided between test preparations, standards-based grading, project-based curriculum, parent and community involvements, service learning, common planning time for integrated units, standards for socio-emotional leaning and advisory. Yet one major necessity of co-teaching includes time, for a team of teachers for their professional development, their students, and a school overall. Time for

cross-curricular course offerings, authentic advisories, integrated units, mini-courses on student-driven topics of interest are just some of the ways that time translates as a benefit. Once a middle grades team is able to reach this level with co-teaching, the benefits can be exponential.

As stated earlier, the overall benefits of co-teaching with teacher candidates include many educational sound ideas and practices. Perhaps the most poignant connection to the research (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013) and that of ours is the focus on the needs of middle schoolers with another set of eyes. However, the question of *how* to maximize co-teaching benefits while minimize its drawbacks naturally remains unanswered. Until this main barrier is addressed, the challenges may continue. Considerations based on this study point to at least the following influencing factor.

Issues with the partial implementation of the middle school model. Challenges related to implementing co-teaching models really ride on more deeply rooted issues with schools that struggle to implement the concept of middle grades education, namely interdisciplinary team teaching. This struggle has been well documented in the literature (Beane, 1997; Mertens, Anfara, Caskey, & Flowers, 2013; Ruder, 2010). The trends of various transitions to and away from the middle school concept over the past 40 to 50 years has created the “arrested development” we see in schools today (Dickinson & Butler, 2001).

One of our program goals is to deliberately try to imbed more co-teaching within our coursework and clinical experiences. Contrary to our goal, we learned that leaving co-teaching up to cooperating teachers led to rather infrequent and informal episodes of co-teaching. And this minimal and happenstance depiction of co-teaching existed despite our emphasizing the importance of co-teaching during initial meetings with the cooperating teachers and teacher candidates. We were unaware that when we witnessed teacher candidates and cooperating

teachers' co-teaching during scheduled observations, that minimal planning had occurred. It means that an even greater emphasis on co-teaching within our clinical experiences is needed to facilitate *confidence and competence* (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013) through a concerted effort toward *gradual release of responsibility* (see Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004).

With regards to our study, the interrelatedness of co-teaching showed us that it may have helped to be more assertive in scheduling specific times for the cooperating teachers to observe other student teachers. A major component of our "experiment" was lost as not all of the student teachers were able to receive substantive feedback from multiple teachers. Despite these interruptions, three of the four teacher candidates at Prairieland were observed teaching at least one lesson by at least one teacher other than their cooperating teacher.

Implications for Future Study

The Unidentified Co-teacher

The notion that co-teaching is something that occurs between two teachers of different content/contexts needs to be considered. For example, when asked about her co-teaching identity, a math teacher reported, "Currently, I guess I would say no. Because I am the only one in my classroom" (Ms. Cori Dayle, personal communication, October 15, 2014). This response seems to suggest that this teacher's identification (or lack thereof) as a co-teacher is directly tied to physical space and the sharing of that space. It is less defined by what teachers do every day, in terms of co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessment. It seems more defined by traditional perspectives/models and of control and delivery.

However, co-teaching arrangements and movements need to include teacher candidates, collegiate instructors, and others who may intentionally share in the content planning, teaching,

and assessment of middle schoolers in some varying way. Accordingly, the various definitions/models and the limited research concerning co-teaching among middle level faculty is dangerously inadequate. None of these takes into account the unfolding nature of co-teaching as it might occur among middle school teachers engaged in interdisciplinary teams.

A Framework for Co-teaching

Besides the benefits already shared, there are multiple and poignant dimensions that surface from the experiences between teacher candidates and university faculty. These particular dimension and benefits are almost non-existent in the literature on co-teaching. They include: (1) early clinical and co-teaching opportunities for teacher candidates; (2) going beyond observations and the norm by having a focus on co-teaching authenticity with teachers, students, and the school curriculum; and (3) increased faculty and cooperating teacher collaborations and partnerships or reciprocal co-teaching.

Our goal in conducting this study was to determine if and how providing co-teaching experiences enhances teacher preparation for teacher candidates, professional development for practicing teachers and university faculty, and improved instruction for middle grades students. This goal was realized and is seen in the many facets of data that emerged from the constituents involved. More importantly, we changed as a result of these experiences.

This framework offers ideas for immersed co-teaching experiences as described; on-going conversations between constituents; and a process that encourages examination of pedagogical approaches and self-reflexivity. This framework provides evidence of self-affirming efficacy for faculty, teacher candidates, and cooperating teachers; and it provides an impetus for stronger relationships with and the preparation of middle level teacher candidates.

Increased attention to differentiated instruction and curriculum demands that incoming professionals be proficient in meeting the needs of every student. Given that middle level educational frameworks, current inclusion practices, and demands for differentiation are all dependent upon teachers working together, increasing the presence of co-teaching within middle level teacher education program is both pragmatically sound and connected to foundational theories of middle level education. Early exposure to co-teaching models can better equip our students for their future work in today's schools. This study critically explored the professional growth possible from the implementation of a co-teaching model within a middle level education program.

Co-teaching is not the answer to world hunger. It is not the solution to world peace. In fact, co-teaching may not even really be the best solution for certain educators in certain situations. But it is arguably a powerful means to effect change and to reinvent our schools and ourselves in the efforts to better reach and teach America's youth.

Limitations

Future research studies could benefit from conducting additional phases involving the different co-teaching models to inquire into any potential variations between and across co-teaching experiences. Only four co-teaching models were used in this study, and of these four candidates relied most heavily on Station Teaching (Meadow View) and One Teach, One Assist (Prairieland). Moreover, infrequent and informal episodes of co-teaching occurred. Different results and unique data may occur by emphasizing the importance of co-teaching during initial meetings with the cooperating teachers and teacher candidates along with greater emphases on co-teaching within earlier clinical experiences. Future studies could also benefit from large scale qualitative and quantitative research between multiple institutions, courses, and diverse teacher

populations to examine potential variances between co-teaching model and between levels of preparedness for in-service teaching.

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