Rethinking Field Experience: Partnership Teaching Versus Single-Placement Teaching
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RETHINKING FIELD EXPERIENCE
PARTNERSHIP TEACHING VERSUS SINGLE-PLACEMENT TEACHING

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Three types of data were gathered on a partnership and a single-placement model of early field experience. Data came from mentor and preservice teacher interviews, preservice teacher time logs, and transcripts of planning sessions. Although all mentors and preservice teachers found value in their experience, data indicate that those who participated in partnership placements had a very different experience. Preservice teachers in partner-placements felt better supported and were able to engage in greater instructional risks within the classroom. Children in classrooms where partners were placed were reportedly better served. Mentors in partnership placements were more flexible in planning with preservice teachers and appeared to be more trusting. The authors conclude that partnership placement holds promise for providing richer, more interesting, and more educative early field experience for elementary preservice teachers than traditional practice allows.

Over the past 15 years, teacher education has come under growing criticism. Part of the response to this criticism in both the United Kingdom and in North America has been to increase the amount of time students spend in the field and to expand the role of mentor teachers as teacher educators (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999). For teacher education students and teachers alike, teacher education is thought of as being synonymous with time spent in the field, particularly student teaching (Bullough, Kauchak, Crow, Hobbs, & Stokes, 1997). Indeed, across the board, the value of school experience to teacher education is, as Johnston (1994) suggested, “accepted almost on blind faith” (p. 199). Recognizing the powerful influence school context plays on beginning teacher development, at the same time, effort has been directed toward forging professional development schools: Better schools create better teachers and better teacher education (see Patterson, Michelli, & Pacheco, 1999). Despite recognition that not all school experience is educative (Zeichner, 1990), these developments have taken place within a dearth of research. “Little is known about the effectiveness of the various
models for the delivery of field experience programs. All too often, models for student teaching . . . are developed out of convenience or tradition” (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990, p. 517). The same conclusion holds for field experiences generally.

There is a growing need for experimentation with configurations of field experience and for the generation and study of new models to determine their effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

Like other teacher educators, we find ourselves immersed in a never-ending round of program development efforts. In our recent deliberations, we came to doubt the value of some well-established practices, particularly the value of soloing in student teaching. Goodlad (1994) observed that teacher education has long been characterized by the values of individualism; teacher education students make their way through their programs on their own. In response to this issue, as in many other programs across the nation seeking to establish a “shared ordeal” (Lortie, 1995), student cohorts were formed at our university. Yet, cohorts have not proven to be an unqualified success (Bullough et al., 1999). Concern remained that more could be done to maximize the educational value of the much-praised (by mentor teachers) increase in the amount of time spent in schools. We desired means of enhancing beginning teachers’ understanding of learning to teach as a collegial and shared enterprise. A residual question arose from the long-established commitment of the university to professional development schools (PDSs): How might we increase the positive impact of the program on mentor teachers—and on children, because our aim is the simultaneous renewal of schooling and of teacher education?

While struggling with these questions and related issues, a proposal gradually began to take form around the concept of partnership teaching. We wondered about the value of teaming multiple teacher education students (preservice teachers) with a single mentor teacher. The literature addresses the value of peer feedback and evaluation on student teacher learning: “Risk taking becomes easier in equal peer relationships than with a person in authority” (Hawkey, 1995, p. 181). Feelings of greater support are also commonly noted. We thought that mentor teachers might benefit not only from an “extra pair of hands” in the classroom (Bullough et al., 1999) but from the opportunity to rethink their practice with two dedicated aspiring elementary school teachers instead of one. But, we also thought that partnership teaching might dramatically increase a mentor teacher’s workload.

Four sets of research questions were formed: (a) Does placing teacher education students in a partnership arrangement encourage a collaborative conception of teacher development among beginning teachers? (b) What patterns of interaction emerge between mentors and preservice teachers in single and partnership placements? Are these patterns different from those suggested as commonplace by the research? Respecting this question, research suggests that the quality of field experience generally and student teaching in particular is in good measure dependent on the quality of the relationships between student teachers and mentor teachers (McNally, Inglis, & Stronach, 1997). Moreover, differences in the kind and quality of interaction profoundly influence teacher learning (Elliott, 1995). Although patterns vary depending on how the mentor teacher role is understood (Hawkey, 1998), and recognizing that mentoring appears to be highly idiosyncratic (Martin, 1997), the message is still clear: In conferences, mentor teachers dominate the discourse; they give directions, tell stories, and are prescriptive. (c) How do preservice teachers, placed in a partnership, relate to their peer teacher? and How do they assess the quality of their learning experience? Johnston (1994) has argued that “experience alone is not enough [to become a teacher]. It is the thought and subsequent action associated with the experience that determines its value in the learning process” (p. 207). Teaching experiences need to be processed, and we thought that partnership teaching might offer a means for processing. Finally, (d) How does partnership teaching impact the classroom including men-
tor teachers’ learning and workloads? Many studies have noted that serving as a cooperating teacher has a positive impact on mentor-teacher learning (Duquette, 1994; Stark, 1994). Nevertheless, as Griffin (1989) noted some years ago, the benefit to a mentor teacher of having a student teacher is likely minimal. Trade-offs are involved. The result is that classroom placements are often made out of convenience and because of teacher goodwill. It is apparent that teachers, particularly those working within schools with large numbers of “at-risk” children, rightfully have become increasingly concerned about the potentially negative impact on themselves and on school children of having teacher education students in the classroom (Bullough et al., 1997). These are serious issues.

MODEL AND DESIGN

The elementary certification sequence is three semesters long, and field placements begin early and are continuous, culminating with student teaching. The current study was conducted with teacher education students in the second semester who were assigned to one of two urban schools to teach on Thursdays and Fridays for 13 weeks. The expectation was established with mentor teachers that the preservice teachers would plan and teach lessons on these days. In addition to the mentor teachers, a building facilitator was employed by the university and was available to assist the preservice teachers. The preservice teachers were randomly assigned to two groups: One group was composed of single preservice teachers placed with a mentor teacher for the entire 13-week period. The second group was composed of preservice teachers placed in partnerships, 2 preservice teachers placed with a single mentor for 13 weeks. Partner and mentor assignments were made randomly. All mentor teachers volunteered to work with either a single preservice teacher or a pair. All were approved by their building administrators and by university supervisors as qualified to mentor novice teachers. Mentors were given a standard orientation to the program, which included discussion of university performance standards for preservice teachers and the roles and responsibilities of mentors (including the responsibility to give ongoing feedback to preservice students and to review lesson plans). We were interested in seeing what variations might emerge, so no special instruction was given in supervision, mentoring, or teaming practices.

Data were gathered from 27 preservice teachers and 18 mentor teachers. However, because of the failure of 6 students to complete the exit interviews, full and usable data sets were obtained for only 21 preservice teachers; of these, 12 were in partner placements, and 9 were in single placements. Nine of the mentors worked with a pair of preservice teachers and 9 with a single preservice teacher.

School Contexts

Preservice teachers were placed in two urban elementary schools located within the same school district. Both schools qualify for schoolwide Title I funding from the federal government, and both are characterized by high mobility (nearly 100% student turnover per year) and high poverty (indicated by the number of children who qualify for free or reduced school lunch). Each school serves about 800 children, kindergarten through sixth grade, and has a teaching staff of about 35 teachers. Approximately half of each school’s student body is composed of minority children, and 40% of the children in one of the schools speak English as a second language. In 1998, both student groups scored at the 23rd percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), which is a source of considerable concern to both teachers and administrators. Although scores are improving, the two schools remain near the bottom within the district.

Procedure

Three types of data were gathered. (a) Complete data sets included two interviews with the preservice teachers, one early and one late in the semester. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team who had no formal connection to or responsibility for those interviewed. A set protocol was used for each inter-
view that sought to elicit information about mentor and preservice teacher roles and relationships, teaming practices, decision-making patterns, and the positive and negative outcomes of the experience. All mentor teachers were interviewed at the end of the term on these same issues, and additional questions were asked relating to their assessment of preservice teacher development and whether they would prefer mentoring one or two preservice teachers in the future. Comparisons were made between preservice teacher and mentor teacher interview data to identify potentially important points of disagreement in their assessments of the experience. Partner preservice teacher interviews were also compared to identify potential disagreements in interpretation that might have significance for our understanding of the models’ impact. (b) To determine differences in preservice teacher roles and relationships, preservice teachers kept time logs. The logs were divided into nine categories of how time was spent during the day: team planning, small group instruction, whole group instruction, team teaching, supportive interaction (assisting individual pupils), performing routines, dealing with challenging pupil behavior, individual lesson preparation and associated activities (correcting papers, gathering materials), and tutoring. The preservice teachers were asked to mark what they were doing at half-hour intervals throughout the day and then to indicate the amount of time spent on the activity. (c) Finally, to check perception with practice and to see if patterns of interaction differed between the two models, arrangements were made to have two preservice and mentor teacher planning sessions for each classroom (one early in the semester and one late) audiotaped for transcription and analysis. Because of difficulties in taping, only 20 of 36 tapes could be completely transcribed. These 20 transcripts did contain planning sessions for all the preservice teachers and their mentors.

Interview data were separated into four categories: (a) mentor teacher, single-placement; (b) mentor teacher, partner-placement; (c) preservice teacher, single-placement; and (d) preservice teacher, partner-placement. The research team coded several transcripts individually and then as a group, seeking what Guba (1978) called “recurring regularities” (p. 53)—patterns of shared meaning. Through this process, a set of categories for coding were identified: planning patterns, mentor teacher role and responsibilities, preservice teacher role, teaming practice, support patterns, negative and positive outcomes for mentors, preservice teachers, and children (“downsides” and “upsides” of having preservice teachers in the classroom). This initial team coding session established the process for subsequent data analysis, which included identification of outliers as well as dominant interpretative patterns.

The research team divided into subgroups, each taking responsibility for analyzing a category. Transcripts were analyzed independently by members of the research team, interpretations were compared within groups, a consensus interpretation was arrived at, and, finally, a summary report was written. The entire team then met and discussed in detail the summary reports. Consensus of interpretation was achieved, and outliers were identified.

Data from the time logs were converted into average hours spent within each of the nine categories of teacher activity. Comparisons were then made between how the preservice teachers in partnership and single-placements spent their time.

Planning session transcripts were analyzed. Following Huberman (1995), the transcripts were subjected to a series of data compressions—low-inference condensations—that allowed comparisons of the transcripts within and across single and partner-placements. In addition, the transcripts were subjected to content analysis to determine who controlled the planning agenda, the openness of the agenda, and topics and types of interaction that occurred.

RESULTS

Single-Placement, Preservice Teachers

When the preservice teachers were teaching, the mentor teacher was engaged relatively little with the class. “She is in and out of the room,
rarely there, does her own thing.” Whereas preservice teachers taught, mentor teachers observed and often did their own work (correcting papers or getting organized for a lesson). Work was split, and roles clearly separated: “It pretty much seems to me like she’s not even paying attention as to what’s going on at all.” For the preservice teachers, to teach was to present, to stand in front of the class and take charge. “When I’m in the classroom, she assumes no responsibility.” The central concern of the preservice teachers was to fit into the established curriculum. Lesson plan topics almost always came from mentor teachers, and preservice teachers rarely sought greater control of the curriculum or more involvement with it: “She wants me to teach her class,” Allie remarked. There was one clear exception: a preservice teacher who organized special projects, add-ons, outside of the regular curriculum. Once topics were assigned, there was considerable variation in degrees of freedom and responsibility. Natasha stood at one extreme: “I do it on my own. . . I do whatever I want.” The majority of students stood opposite Natasha, and, of these, most were frustrated by having so little input into instruction: “Suck it up, and do your best, and you’re going to have some hard experiences.” Transcripts from the 12 single-placement planning sessions confirmed this conclusion. In the planning sessions (12 transcribed for single-placements), the pattern was consistent with the findings of Guyton and McIntyre (1990): Mentor teachers talked, presented topics, or gave a plan; preservice teachers listened and responded. When responding, 2 grabbed hold of the mentor’s suggestions and began thinking aloud about them, and when thinking aloud the suggestions evolved. A third of the mentor teachers responded flexibly in planning, incorporating preservice teacher suggestions and adapting initial plans.

Relationships with mentors tended to be quite formal. The preservice teachers expected and wanted mentor feedback, but only 1 felt she had received substantial and helpful advice and criticism. This was a source of frustration: “She [the mentor teacher] hasn’t really done much of anything.” There was little evidence of teaming. When difficulties arose, the preservice teachers went first to intern coordinators employed by the university, with whom they had established relationships, and then to cooperating teachers. The perception of the preservice teachers was that mentor teachers mostly provided a place for practice teaching.

Partner-Placement, Preservice Teachers

In the partner setting, the preservice teachers and the mentor teachers tended to plan together. Only 3 of the 12 preservice teachers interviewed spoke of planning with a partner without mention of the mentor teacher. In one of the six teams, the preservice teachers stated that they would plan but that their plans would be overruled by the mentor teacher. In all the partnerships, preservice teachers worked within the mentor teacher’s curriculum and activity structure, but (with one group exception) they asserted they had some control over the methods used in their teaching. Usually, as with the single-placements, the mentors suggested the topics to be taught. Analysis of the transcripts of the planning sessions indicated that the majority of the mentor teachers responded flexibly to the preservice teachers’ ideas for teaching; adjustments were made in the mentor’s plans based on preservice teacher suggestions. With one exception, team planning sessions were characterized by a great deal of interaction and mentor teacher support: “[Our mentor] is not afraid to let us try [things].” The mentors typically established the agenda for the meetings, but, as the meetings proceeded, they became increasingly interactive and less dominated by mentor teachers. In most cases, the preservice teachers felt they had considerable control over what they would do in the classroom and worked closely together when planning: “We cling to each other for planning.” One stated that her mentor “gives us topics and then we just plan on that.” Another remarked, “For the most part, like on a weekly basis, she tells us what subjects she wants us to teach and that’s about all she does.” A third of the preservice teachers stated that their mentor teacher generally encouraged experimentation by standing.
back and letting them teach while providing “back-up.”

For the partner teachers, the key role of the mentor was to give feedback on their teaching—a view consistent with university expectations. Usually, that feedback was given after teaching, although 1 preservice teacher reported her mentor giving feedback on her plans prior to teaching. For 2 of the preservice teachers, the mentor feedback was not specific enough or, in 1 case, was judged too positive. It is worth noting that only 1 of the 12 preservice teachers identified the role of the mentor teacher as a “model” of teaching methods and one who thinks about teaching.

Overwhelmingly, when the preservice teachers spoke about their own role, it was in terms of “supporting” their partner. This support took several forms: giving feedback and ideas, sharing and talking, and serving as observers and aides. When asked to whom they would go when things went wrong in the classroom, all reported going first to their teaching partner for help. They relied on each other for emotional and personal support. Surprisingly, the interviews were void of talk about mentor teachers as sources of emotional support. One preservice teacher captured the sense of the group when she said,

> When there’s two of us, I really feel like you can talk, and pat each other on the back and lift each other up. Yes, you can get that from your mentor teacher, but sometimes they don’t understand how serious we’re taking [teaching] in our hearts.

All the partners shared carpools traveling to and from school, which served as an oft-mentioned venue for giving and receiving support and for working through plans: “We plan our lives [together],” even to the point of one carpool member’s reading assigned readings aloud to the others as they traveled.

Without exception, the preservice teachers liked working with a partner. They valued having someone to talk to, bounce ideas off, work with, and provide “more support” to others who were in the “same boat.” They reported an increased level of confidence when there was someone to support, console, and talk with. One preservice teacher’s comment captured the sense of the entire group: “We’re . . . in it together.” They also valued the diversity of ideas and teaching styles brought by their partners. They appreciated having a back-up, someone they could trust and count on for help, including help with classroom management:

> Something wasn’t going right [in class] and [my partner] stepped in, you know, in a way that wasn’t like “you can’t do this, get out of the way and let me take over.” It was more like, “I’ll help, I’ll help.”

At least 3 of the preservice teachers felt there was better classroom control with a partner in the room. This conclusion is supported by analysis of the planning transcripts. Of the eight partner planning sessions, half included no mention of management or discipline concerns. Of the four that included management and discipline talk, one was wholly complimentary. In only one instance did a mentor initiate the discussion of management.

The preservice teachers noted few drawbacks to having a teaching partner. Two said there was a possibility of increased miscommunication, but they did not indicate this actually was a problem. One said there could be a dependent relationship created in which one partner relies too much on the other. The only male preservice teacher was concerned that, with a partner in the room, one had to share the time to teach. He thought that might actually slow down the development of one’s own “teaching style.” His concern was about the “[amount of] time you actually got to spend teaching.” Although valuing her partner, another preservice teacher remarked that the practicum was “artificial,” that for her, “real” teaching is a solitary endeavor.

**Comparison: Single- With Partner-Placements**

Both the single- and partner-placed preservice teachers worked within mentor teachers’ established curricula. However, differences emerged. The partner-placed preservice teachers enjoyed greater control over not only how they would teach but what they would teach. Single-placed preservice teachers saw their role primarily as a matter of fitting into the mentor’s program with
minimal disruption, which was a source of disappointment for some.

Partner teachers were more engaged in planning than were single-placed teachers. Data drawn from the student time logs indicated partner teachers spent 30% more time planning for instruction than did their single-placement counterparts. For them, planning operated on two levels: the first with mentor teachers and the second with partners. Partners reported that their lessons were richer and more varied than they would have been had they been placed alone. They had “more ideas” with which to work: “I feel like we’ve been able to develop our lessons better.”

In contrast to single-placed preservice teachers, partnered teachers consistently occupied a greater variety of roles within the classroom. Whereas both sets of preservice teachers tended to think of teaching as standing in front of a classroom and engaging in direct instruction, partnered teachers worked more with small groups of pupils, tutored, and interacted with individual students in supportive ways. The time logs presented evidence of a dramatic difference between partner- and single-placement preservice teacher activity. Partner teachers reported spending twice as much time working in small groups and about a fifth less time in whole-group instruction. Furthermore, partners reported spending approximately 40% more time assisting individual pupils. These differences suggest that children in these classrooms not only received greater teacher assistance but that the instructional pattern itself was different: Children had greater opportunities to interact with other children.

There were differences within the group of partnered preservice teachers that deserve mention: Half of the partners partitioned teaching, that is, they took turns being responsible for the class. In this arrangement, when one preservice teacher was teaching, the partner who was awaiting her turn generally provided support by monitoring behavior and helping individual pupils. However, half of the teams reported working in ways that can best be characterized as “full teaming,” not merely turn-taking. Within full teaming, partners were fully engaged and responsible for events within the classroom. Sometimes both preservice teachers would be in front of the class; at other times, each would have responsibility for a part of the class.

Perhaps the most dramatic difference between partner- and single-placements was the kind and quality of support available. Partners became friends but also invested in one another’s development as teachers. One preservice teacher who characterized herself as “timid” said,

There is more support [in the partner-placement]. You learn a lot, you support each other and build each other up. . . . I feel I have learned so much more this semester with another preservice teacher in the classroom [than those in a single-placement].

Not only did they give emotional support to one another, they became interested and invested in one another’s successes. They bailed one another out when something went amiss in the classroom. Single-placed teachers generally felt they were alone and felt somewhat unsupported by their mentors, whom they recognized as extraordinarily busy people. Given these differences, it is not surprising to find that single-placed preservice teachers were much more concerned about discipline and management than were their partnered peers.

Twenty of the 21 preservice teachers thought their experience was valuable but, overall, the partnered preservice teachers were more positive about the experience and reported a higher level of confidence about teaching.

**Mentor Teacher Single-Placement**

Mentors thought of themselves as being very successful in fulfilling their mentoring roles. They reported serving several functions: observer; source of ideas, resources, and feedback. One remarked that she was “like a mother to her [preservice teacher].” In contrast to preservice teacher reports, the mentors believed they gave a good deal of feedback (although lack of adequate time for giving feedback was a frequently mentioned problem). One teacher dealt with this problem by “leaving messages on answering machines.” Roles were not nego-
tiated; rather, they were defined by the mentor teacher, who generally assumed that preservice teachers would fit into the established curriculum. The separation of roles was judged as valuable: “Because my BYU student does some of the more mundane things, I have time to work on other demands the children have, or give them more individual attention.”

As described by the mentors and revealed in the transcripts, planning in single-placement classrooms was primarily a matter of providing preservice teachers with topics and materials. In the 12 planning session transcripts, only 1 preservice teacher was given and accepted the opportunity to develop her own lessons. Another mentor gave options from which the preservice teacher could choose, and 1 allowed the preservice teacher to fill in curricular gaps with activities she (the preservice teacher) designed. This mentor teacher praised this preservice teacher, saying, “[She] goes all out to prepare special lessons.” The other 6 preservice teachers were expected to fit in, and, as a mentor remarked, “stay the course.” The mentor’s challenge, as one teacher said, was then to “coordinate” what would be done. Coordination was an issue, in part, because the students were not in the school until Thursday of each week. Flexibility was limited because of the mentor teachers’ concerns about covering the topics in the state core curriculum and preparing for the upcoming competency testing.

For these mentors, management and discipline were important concerns and topics of conversation in planning sessions: “I thought your control was excellent. You had everything prepared and set up well.” Usually, the subject of management was broached by the mentor teacher, although not always. In the planning sessions, mentors gave suggestions and advice, and the preservice teachers listened: “Well, next time let’s try keeping them in their seats.”

The mentors reported that they liked having the preservice teachers in their classes. All found value in being enabled by the preservice teachers to see their classes from a different or new perspective: “I can sit at the back of the room and watch my student working with my class. I have learned much about my students from watching how they act with the [preservice teacher].” They appreciated having an “extra set of hands,” as one teacher put it, to help the children. As another mentor noted, “our math scores are so low on achievement tests that we have to teach math three times a day. So, it is helpful to have the additional person in the room.” Although one teacher commented that the preservice teachers “haven’t hurt [the children],” all thought they were helpful: “Good things happen in the classroom.” “[She] took the time to bond with one of my ESL girls who spoke very little English. She really spent a lot of time reading books to her in Spanish and English. Now the little girl has blossomed.” Four mentors noted that the preservice teachers brought “variety” to the curriculum. Three commented positively on preservice teacher vitality: “[They] bring such energy and enthusiasm to the classroom.” “They are full of ideas, and both the children and I learn from them.” A few mentors took pleasure and pride in seeing the preservice teachers develop as teachers: “I give her advice and then watch her succeed.”

Despite noting that working with preservice teachers placed greater demands on their time, for these mentor teachers, the benefits of serving as a mentor clearly outweighed the disadvantages.

**Mentor Teacher Partner-Placements**

Mentors working with pairs of preservice teachers in a single classroom characterized their own role as being that of guide, advisor, source of resources, “voice of warning,” facilitator, and, especially, someone responsible for giving feedback. The roles were diverse and recognized as complex. Like their colleagues working with single preservice teachers, they expected the preservice teachers to work within the established curriculum. However, the preservice teachers were given a relatively high degree of flexibility in how they presented their lessons. Over time, this pattern changed: The preservice teachers were given full responsibility for planning at least some part of the school day, typically reading or mathematics. As one
At first it was me planning and them nodding, and now it’s almost one full circle. They’re planning and they work really good together.” Analysis of the planning session transcripts indicated that the mentor teachers were generally supportive of preservice teachers’ suggestions and that lessons often evolved in response to these suggestions, resulting in greater preservice teacher responsibility for the curriculum.

These mentor teachers expressed a level of trust and confidence in their preservice teachers that was higher than that expressed by mentors working with single preservice teachers:

I would like us to divide the class in thirds on Thursday and each of us have a group of six or seven children [to teach]. We would all three be teaching the exact same thing. Okay? But I’m not going to plan any of it. You are. You are going to plan it all and you’re going to give me... plans. Okay?

As one mentor remarked, “They are teachers.” Half the mentors described the preservice teachers as “peers.” Three of the 9 mentor teachers actively encouraged the preservice teachers to experiment within the classroom, to take risks and test ideas: “I said, you go for it. Do it! If it doesn’t work out, we’ll revamp, we’ll talk about it.”

Another mentor remarked, “They can do whatever they want, they can take whatever I have.” These mentors thought of themselves as part of the team, saying that what was accomplished within the classroom was a “full-team effort,” a result of “serious teaming.”

When discussing the team, the mentors recognized that the preservice teachers usually went to their partners for support. This was not a source of concern. In fact, they encouraged the preservice teachers to work through problems together.

Without exception, when speaking about drawbacks, these mentors indicated that having two preservice teachers in the classroom created greater stress and took more time and work at the beginning of the term than would have been spent with one person. However, nearly all said that having them in the classroom was worthwhile. The reasons they valued their presence paralleled their colleagues’ reasons for valuing a single preservice teacher. They were sources of new ideas: “they give me the latest techniques,” “fresh ideas,” “they bring wonderful things to the classroom!” The mentors reported having “grown” by serving as a mentor. As one remarked, “[I’ve] become a better teacher.” They saw value in having an “extra pair of hands” in the classroom, and they liked interacting with other adults. None saw any negative effect on pupils, although one commented that students became a bit more “hyper” and noisy when the preservice teachers were present. A common theme was that the energy level in the classroom increased because of the preservice teachers; another was that there was greater help available to individual students: “She uses manipulatives and up and down movement, little paperwork if any, huge interaction with students, and that’s really caught a lot of my low students that have been missed.” A few mentors of partner- and single-placement preservice teachers noted that curriculum coverage and coordination of topics was difficult because the university students were in the school only 2 days a week.

Comparison: Mentor Teacher Single- and Partner-Placements

When planning, mentor teachers gave both groups of preservice teachers topics and provided ideas and resources for teaching. There were, however, differences evident not only in interviews but in the transcripts of the planning sessions. Overall, the mentor teachers working with partnered preservice teachers were more flexible in responding to preservice teacher curricular suggestions and more supportive of those suggestions. One possible explanation for this difference is that the mentors working with two preservice teachers were able to be more trusting, recognizing that together they were better able to plan a lesson and manage a class than they would be alone. This might also help account for the near total absence of management and discipline talk in the partner teacher planning sessions. There also may have been fewer disciplinary problems with two preservice teachers present in the classroom.
For both sets of preservice teachers, the mentor role included the expectation of receiving significant feedback; both sets were somewhat disappointed, despite mentor perceptions of having given adequate feedback. This tension may be inevitable. Yet, the expectations of mentors held by the two groups of preservice teachers were in some respects different. The rather formal nature of their relationship with their mentor was less troubling to the paired preservice teachers, who did not look as much to their mentors for emotional support. Not expecting such support may have softened their disappointment. The single-placed preservice teachers found themselves turning to the building facilitators first and away from their mentors for support.

There was wide variation in mentor teacher roles when the preservice teachers taught. As noted, mentors working with single-placed preservice teachers generally disengaged, taking the presence of the preservice teacher as an opportunity to accomplish a variety of teaching tasks. Without question, the mentor role was made more complex by the partner-placements, and they fulfilled a greater range of roles. In full teaming, the mentor often found a supportive instructional place and, thus, could accurately talk about being peer teachers. They also worked with individual students, sometimes taking responsibility for a small group of pupils, as well as engaging in the activities expected of mentors. They observed the preservice teachers and gave feedback. An additional point needs to be made here: One partner preservice teacher observed that it was difficult for her mentor to give feedback to both teachers and that sometimes advice was generic. Giving separate feedback requires additional time and complicates the mentor role.

Although all mentors found value in having preservice teachers in the classroom and reported gaining from the experience, the mentors working with partner preservice teachers spoke most positively about the preservice teachers’ impact on children and their learning. Most mentors asserted that the curriculum was enriched by the preservice teachers, especially those mentors working with two preservice teachers. One mentor captured the general view of those working with two preservice teachers: “Two are a lot harder than one. . . . There is more preparation time, requires more feedback, but it is worth it because it is better for the children to have two.” This teacher went further and said that if she had the preservice teachers in her classroom full-time during student teaching rather than just 2 days a week, all the disadvantages would disappear.

**DISCUSSION**

We begin by returning to the four questions underpinning the study. (a) Does placing teacher education students in a partnership arrangement encourage a collaborative conception of teacher development among beginning teachers? As noted, the traditional practice in teacher education has been for students to proceed through their programs toward certification in solitary fashion. Cohorts are offered as a solution to program fragmentation and student feelings of disconnectedness. The teacher education students in this study were placed in a cohort and took much of their coursework together. Nevertheless, preservice teachers placed with a single mentor teacher had a very different practicum experience than those in a partnership placement. Preservice teachers in partner-placements not only felt better supported throughout the experience but came to see themselves as responsible for one another’s development. They invested significantly in each other, not only to assist in the classroom but to help with life’s problems. The general sense was nicely captured in the concluding interview by one preservice teacher, who said, “You [beginning teachers] need to depend on each other.” Moreover, the opportunity to be in a classroom with a partner and to observe teaching encouraged reflection followed by interaction:

I get to observe not only an experienced teacher, but another student on my level who’s going through the same experiences of being a new . . . teacher. Seeing how those kids respond to her, [I] learn. . . . Sometimes I get involved in my lesson and I don’t realize what’s going on with my students, and when I’m not
teaching I get to see exactly what is going on with the students. It’s interesting. . . . [My partner and I] talk. Did you know I was having a bad day? We get to express our concerns about what’s going on.

(b) What patterns of interaction emerge between mentors and preservice teachers in single and partnership placements? The conference pattern within the single-placements was consistent with that described by Guyton and McIntyre (1990). Mentor teachers set the agenda and dominated interaction. However, this was not universally true, which suggests that had each mentor teacher been exposed to a training program in addition to the orientation given, this pattern might have been altered. By contrast, those participating in partner-placements appeared to function more like a team. Although the mentors still established the curricular boundaries within which the preservice teachers were expected to plan and teach, interaction was more collaborative and planning more flexible. Moreover, it appears as though there were higher levels of trust.

There are a number of possible explanations for these differences. Two preservice teachers who work effectively together may inspire greater confidence among mentor teachers not only because they bring twice the knowledge and experience to the classroom but because they help one another when difficulties arise. Thus, the mentor teacher is able to assume a less directive role within the classroom and with the preservice teachers. Clearly, the presence of two preservice teachers within the classroom who are, as they said, “in the same boat,” alters the pattern of power within the classroom. Most of the mentors working with partner preservice teachers recognized this change as opening up educational opportunities for children, and they responded by assuming a role more like a team member and an advisor than a supervisor. These teachers did not disengage from the class.

Preservice teacher disappointment with the amount of mentor feedback received requires special mention. Based on the mentor views of the time and effort they dedicated to assisting the preservice teachers, the expectations of the preservice teachers may have been unreasonable. Mentors with two preservice teachers clearly had greater difficulty making time to give consistent and helpful feedback than did their colleagues with just one. Yet potentially, three-way conferences could result in deeper analyses and richer, more complex, and more open conversations about teaching. Largely because of time limitations, opportunities to talk about teaching with mentors were comparatively rare and often rushed. As a result, single-placed preservice teachers felt they did not receive sufficient support from their mentors, and they felt isolated. Facing a similar situation, the partner-placed preservice teachers turned to one another and had extended discussions about teaching.

(c) How do preservice teachers, placed in a partnership, relate to their peer teacher? and How do they assess the quality of their learning experience? As noted, close friendship developed among partner teachers. But in addition to friendship, close professional relationships were formed, at the center of which stood their interest in teaching and learning to teach. Randomly assigned, it is surprising that no teams broke down. Some difficulties were experienced when coordinating responsibilities and schedules and negotiating differences in conceptions of teaching. For example, one partner-placed preservice teacher remarked,

Sometimes, if you haven’t planned really well [together], that makes it hard to flow between the [partners]. Between two teachers. Because one person’s got an idea of how it’s going to end up and the other person’s got another idea of how it’s going to end up. . . . One person tries to step in and fix what the other one doesn’t see as broken.

Despite these challenges, with one exception, all the partner-placed teachers would, if given the opportunity, choose again to work with a partner. But even this lone exception thought the experience was extremely valuable and even fun: “I am having a great time!” His concern, echoed by others, was grounded in a view that to teach is to stand in front of a class and talk. On this view, partner teaching is not good preparation for “real” teaching, for the isolation of a regular classroom. This issue relates directly to our first research question. Despite feeling invested in one another’s development, a concern lingers:
Is team teaching real teaching, and is it adequate preparation for the 1st year of teaching? Certainly there is an individual dimension to learning to teach, as McNally et al. (1997) argued: “[Beginning teachers] meet the reality of teaching as individuals in the classroom and ultimately have to make their own sense of it” (pp. 487-488). However, we believe that it is crucially important to future school improvement efforts that this taken-for-granted view of teaching and of learning to teach be altered. We agree with Howey and Zimpher (1999): “Most fundamental to the improvement of teacher education is addressing how all teachers are prepared to work with one another” (p. 294). Such a shift in understanding is needed, given the growing complexity of teaching and the need for teachers to engage in continuing professional development (see Lytle, 2000).

(d) How does partnership teaching impact the classroom including mentor teachers’ learning and workloads? Overwhelmingly, the mentors found value in working with the preservice teachers, although they asserted that initially, a partnership placement was more work than a single-placement. They concluded that in the long run, benefits outweighed the drawbacks, including benefit to children who not only received more adult assistance within the classroom but encountered a richer curriculum.

In conclusion, our data suggest that a model of field experience that provides for multiple placement of preservice teachers within a single mentor teacher’s classroom can be beneficial to school-based participants, teachers, and their pupils. A special advantage of this model deserves mention: the reduction in the number of mentor teachers required enables the concentration of effort and energy needed to produce the simultaneous renewal that is the central aim of professional development schools. This advantage alone justifies further inquiry into preservice teacher partnering.

REFERENCES


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