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Co-Teaching Relationships to Cultivate Caring

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Co-Teaching Relationships to Cultivate Caring

Abstract

This study leveraged the implementation of co-teaching as a relational model for the teacher training practicum. Specifically, this study examines how teachers in caring collegial relationships foster caring classroom environments, probing the following inquiry question: *when co-teachers collaborate, what features of their co-teaching practices do they leverage to cultivate caring relationships among their students?* Leveraging care ethics theory, we found that teacher-candidates and their mentor-teachers developed practices to cultivate caring classrooms through authentic modeling of complex aspects of relationship-building as well as practicing confirmation – the habit of assuming the best motives possible underlying a given action. This study informs teacher preparation for caring by showing how the student-teacher practicum can be drawn on to cultivate caring among children.

1. Objectives: Co-Teaching toward Caring

Co-teaching, a collaborative approach to teacher-candidates' student-teaching practicum, is defined as “an arrangement in which two or more teachers plan, instruct, and evaluate together” (Trump & Miller, 1973, p. 354). Co-teaching has gained traction as an alternative collaborative mentorship model (Bacharach et al., 2010; Fraser, 2013) given demonstrated benefits for student learning (Embury, 2010; Friend et al, 2015; Silverman et al, 2009; Walsh, 2012; Goddard et al, 2007; Goddard et al, 2010; Ronfeldt et al, 2015). It also supports teacher-candidate learning (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Austin, 2001; Kohler-Evans, 2006; Patel & Kramer, 2013; Scantlebury et al, 2008). Indeed, Author 1 (date) found that co-teaching afforded teachers the opportunity to harness their collaboration to cultivate more caring collaborative relationships between teachers. This project rests on the assumption that when teachers experience caring within their mentor-mentee relationship, they may be better positioned to cultivate similar caring environments for their students. Specifically, this study examines how teachers in caring collegial relationships foster caring classroom environments, probing the following inquiry question: *when co-teachers collaborate, what features of their co-teaching practices do they leverage to cultivate caring relationships among their students?*

Traditional Student-Teaching

The co-teaching model we use was developed in response to critiques of the traditional student-teaching practicum as competitive and unsupportive for teachers, characterized by “contrived collegiality” and privatism (Hargreaves, 1994, 2002; Lortie, 1975; Lima, 2001) and failing to interrupt teacher isolation (Friend, 2015; Bacharach et al., 2010). (To clarify student-teaching roles described here, *mentor* refers to the teacher-of-record in whose classroom our university students practice teaching. The *candidate* is our university student and teacher-in-training.) Indeed, research has shown that in the traditional practicum, candidates often take on planning, instructing, and assessing for entire disciplines in isolation without mentor feedback (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ohnstad & Munthe, 2010). Neglecting meaningful mentor involvement, the traditional practicum does not take full advantage of mentor experience

or afford the opportunity for a mentor to learn from a candidate who may be well-positioned to bring ideas from recent research on teaching and learning into the field.

Co-Teaching

Co-teaching, on the other hand centers on a collaborative approach to the student-teaching practicum. (Denise in Ofstedal & Dahlberg, 2009; Patel & Kramer, 2013; Bacharach et al., 2010). Collaborative aspects of co-teaching render it more relational (Murawski, 2009) and promote learning, job satisfaction, and resiliency (Benard, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Podsen, 2002; Gates, 2015). Thus, co-teaching works best in the context of robust relationships that sustain the creative process (Trump & Miller, 1973; Damore & Murray, 2009; Murawski & Dieker, 2013; Murawski, 2009; Murawski, 2013).

2. Perspectives

Care Ethics

An ethic of care provides a conceptual framework through which to examine reciprocal, responsive, and enduring relationships as the foundation of moral education (Noddings, 1984; 1992; 2002; 2012). Caring entails *engrossment* in another's concerns to understand their experience, undergo motivational displacement, and respond to their needs. Noddings' (1984) particular focus on the caring relationship, building on prior notions of care (Mayeroff, 1971; Gilligan, 1982), focuses on the need for the cared-for's recognition of care. Her (2002) approach centers on four open-ended process-oriented practices: A teacher *models* caring relations; engages in open-ended *dialogue* that values relationships between interlocutors over and above the discourse; *practices* caring; and *confirms* another's best intentions.

Given growing recognition of the importance of the social, relational, and emotional dimensions of education (sometimes referred to as "social emotional learning, or SEL), teacher preparation programs have begun to address ethical dimensions of teacher development to develop candidates' capacities for caring relationships as well as dispositions to care and cultivation of student caring (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013; AUTHOR, XXXX; Schussler et al, 2010; Schussler & Knarr, 2013; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013; Charney, 2002; Watson, 2003; Pang, 2005; AUTHOR, XXXX; AUTHORS, XXXX). These relationships are complex, and even as teacher education programs attend to SEL, it is a rare program that pays attention to helping teachers develop their professional relationships with other teachers and leveraging these relationships to support caring for students.

3. Methods

Context: This qualitative action research project builds on a three-year study in a large urban teacher preparation program. Results from year 1 and year 2 data (AUTHOR1, XXXX) indicated that co-teachers either relied on robust caring relationships (87%) or they rarely co-taught (AUTHOR, XXXX). It was also apparent that when co-teachers developed strong relationships, they did so by facing power imbalances, practicing vulnerability and sharing power. In this paper, we revisited year 1 and year 2 data in combination with year three data to examine how co-teachers in caring relationships described modeling caring.

Co-teaching was introduced in a context in which candidates were predisposed via previous classes in the program to value and understand the importance of relationships in education (AUTHORS, XXXX). In the full paper, we describe in detail how care ethics was embedded in program as well as in the teaching practicum as mentors attended candidates' courses focusing on co-teaching practices.

Participants: Participants were one hundred seventy-one pairs of mentors and candidates placed in twelve local districts based on recruitment needs; 75% in Title One schools. Mentor teaching experience ranged widely; the least experienced with 3 years of teaching and the most with 20 years in the classroom. All had mentored prior to this study.

4. Data Sources

Data included recorded and transcribed co-teaching observations, surveys, and interviews. Twenty videos of co-taught lessons were transcribed. Twenty-nine 30-minute interviews with self-nominated co-teachers (16 candidates, 13 mentors) supplemented our understanding of co-teaching practices. Surveys collected co-teachers' feedback on six co-teaching sessions per year and provided descriptions of co-teaching experiences. Twelve sessions, described in the paper, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview and survey protocols are included in the paper.

Analysis: Following Merriam's (1998) description of a grounded theory approach, initial interpretations were cross-checked within one data set against other observations within and across data sets. Comparative analyses throughout the three years of data and cross-checking of initial codes with participants were used to develop relevant thematic categories.

5. Results

We found that successful collaborative teachers modeled caring, made visible their authentic struggle to care, and confirmed one another. About a third of the co-teachers, 93 out of 241, described how they leveraged their caring relationships to cultivate caring relationships among their students. Co-teachers consistently described the ways in which co-teaching involved relating to one another while teaching. Many seemed surprised to discover how their engagement with one another apparently influenced their students to interact with each other in caring ways.

Modeling: Many co-teachers described how their interactions with one another engaged their students. These interactions were accidental at first, but in co-teaching sessions at the end of year one (detailed in the paper) we encouraged the co-teachers to explore how they could draw on the affordances of teaching together to model caring. As one teacher candidate said, "We felt bad because we went off on a connection and we thought we'd lost the kids and we strained to refocus and it turned out they were totally interested in what we were saying! We mentioned this at our session and then began to draw on our ways of relating during teaching."

Another mentor teacher described toward the end-of-the-second-year how he and his candidate used the co-teaching structure to model learning from each other to support his students' collaborative learning.

I was surprised how much our relationship seemed to shift the atmosphere in the room. We were having fun learning from one another and it was infectious. I get overwhelmed by all the pressures and here was this new person with fresh ideas and he was excited about trying things. I found myself asking him questions and practicing with him in front of the kids and we saw this sort of open up how they approached one another. It was like, ‘Oh, this person I’m working with might really say something valuable. I could listen to my partner’ – and then so were they.

Co-teachers also discussed their experiences in co-teaching sessions and began to intentionally model how to relate to others, targeting specific relational skills they wanted their students to learn. For example, in writer’s workshop, some co-teachers modeled peer writer’s conferences for their students, engrossing themselves in each other’s topics and asking probing questions to help each other improve, explicitly drawing the attention of their students to notice the relational moves they were modeling, such as attentive listening and questioning.

Interestingly, many co-teachers seemed surprised that relating with one another during teaching could support their students’ learning. Perhaps teachers are habituated to working in isolation and thus are not primed to practice caring and SEL in their teaching. One teacher candidate expressed this parallel sentiment about her students being “allowed” to interact, “It’s like now they have permission to care about the relational aspect and so they do. That’s what taking time to model it really signifies to them. It’s an environment.”

While each theme could be considered within the category of modeling, two particular sorts of modeling stood out.

Authenticity: Co-teachers modeled acknowledging the real challenges involved in learning to care for one another. In one example, when a pair of co-teachers struggled to get along with one another, a teacher candidate, Ruchi, described how they focused on articulating their challenges, leveraging them to teach students to persist in their relating to each other:

We became comfortable giving each other feedback in front of the kids. It modeled how to approach our struggles to get along. I was very tense the first solo week, so one-on-one she (her mentor) said, “Calm down a little bit teacher Ruchi.” I was kinda starting to order the kids around because I wanted everything to be intact. We got comfortable sharing feedback like, “Hey that’s confusing. Can you put it another way?”

Instead of ignoring the conflict that arose from their different personalities and letting their tensions impact the teaching environment negatively, they aired them intentionally in order to model learning from one another. As her mentor, Lena, said, “Ruchi has a different manner and that’s okay. I might ask her to soften her demands. Or, she might run a tighter ship in here when she’s teaching. I say to the kids, ‘You let us know how you are doing with these differences.’” This sort of interaction contrasts with the contrived collegiality that Hargreaves found characterized teacher relationships and impeded teacher collaboration. These co-teachers modelled how they were actively improving their relationship.

Confirmation: Co-teachers discovered opportunities to confirm one another’s mistakes. Confirmation involves assuming the best motives possible underlying a given

action (Noddings, 1992). We found co-teachers in successful collaborations did this often. In a video-ed observation, for example, candidate Jane taught a math lesson. Mentor Kelly noticed a mistake and interjected: “I see Jane is working hard here. She’s asking good thinking questions. We all make mistakes and they are often where our learning can happen.” Notably, Jane described this experience in a very positive light:

My mentor models caring about the project of learning to teach. It makes my teaching seem more important in front of the students. Like it’s not a bad thing that I’m a novice, but a really profound thing that I am learning to teach. It makes the whole experience seem special.

6. Significance

This study expands care ethics application within the context of teacher and student relationships. The co-teaching practices of modeling, articulating challenges in relationship, and confirmation have potential to cultivate more caring classroom environments. Of note, many participants reported that without encouragement and guidance in the co-teaching workshops to both freely interact during teaching and to draw on this interaction to support caring in the classroom, they may not have honed these practices. Teacher educators need to deconstruct mentoring practices such as these described to prepare teachers for caring collegial relationships in which they can cultivate caring environments in schools.

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