

Cooperating Teachers' Professional Growth through Supervision of Student Teachers and Participation in a Collegial Study Group

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By Penny Arnold

Current educational thinking points toward the benefits of “cooperative learning” in classrooms. Many educators believe that students learn more effectively and in more meaningful ways when they are paired with a classmate or when they are working with others in a group (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Slavin, 1981). Yet, our own professional practice and development as teachers frequently does not allow for such meaningful cooperative learning experiences. As a teacher new to being a cooperating teacher, I wondered what might happen in my own teaching and that of colleagues working with student teachers if we were to meet regularly as a group to

discuss and study the role of cooperating teacher and mentor. I formed a study group and designed this study to find out whether change occurred in our perceptions of ourselves as teachers as well as in our actual classroom practice. I was also interested in knowing whether our work as cooperating teachers might have an impact on students' perceptions of classroom life.

Background

There are several areas of educational research that relate to my interest in collegial professional development for teachers. The most obvious is the considerable work that has been done over the last twenty-five years regarding the issue of professional isolation and its effects on the quality of teaching, student learning, and the profession as a whole. In his comprehensive study of the teaching profession, Lortie (1975) pointed to isolation as an historical byproduct of the one-room schoolhouse. The evolution of schools from separately dispersed one-room establishments to multiple classroom models did not change the fact that teachers worked alone. Far from becoming collaborative learning communities, modern schools, according to Lortie, "were organized around teacher separation rather than teacher interdependence" (14). In such environments, Lortie concludes, "change is impeded by mutual isolation . . . and working conditions which produce a 'more-of-the-same' syndrome among classroom teachers" (232).

Although some progress has been made, current researchers find Lortie's observations of almost thirty years ago largely true for today's teachers and schools. They highlight isolation as a major impediment to student achievement, school reform, and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dillon, 1997; Hamlin, 1997). The high dropout rate among new teachers—30 percent in the first year—is attributed to the isolation that many teachers experience beginning with their first day of teaching. Darling-Hammond (1997) finds that many who choose to stay "learn merely to cope rather than to teach well."

In order to recruit and retain the more than two million well-qualified teachers who will be needed during the next ten years to help students meet demanding academic standards, working conditions will have to improve (U.S. Dept. of Education Information Kit; Darling-Hammond, 1998) and so, too, will professional development opportunities for teachers. We can no longer ignore the fact that what teachers know and do has a significant impact on what students learn (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Nor can we overlook the finding that what is worth knowing about real teaching situations is known primarily by teachers (Lytle, 1992). The scope and process of professional development will have to change to become both more personal and more interactive providing increased time during the school day for teacher collaboration around classroom practice, planning, and problem solving (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dillon, 1997; Murphy, 1998).

Concern about teacher quality is most acute in schools with the highest

percentage of poor children (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 1997; U.S. Dept. of Ed. Information Kit). These are the schools in which new teachers are increasingly finding their first jobs and these are the schools where there is the least support for both students and teachers (Rust, 1999). Preparing new teachers for these settings is critically important. Successful teacher education programs include prolonged internships with adequate support from university-based and school-based practitioners alike, concrete connections between coursework and practice, and performance-based assessments. Koskela and Ganser (1995) point to the need for more direct involvement of cooperating teachers in teacher education programs as a way of narrowing the gap between schools and teacher education institutions and improving the transition of new teachers from the university to the school setting.

The Setting

I am a high school English teacher. Even though I was overwhelmed with extra assignments, when an opportunity came my way to have a student teacher in my classroom and to be one of five cooperating teacher colleagues participating in a study group, I didn't hesitate to embrace it. After eight years of teaching in traditional school structures, I look for ways to diminish the feeling of professional isolation and anxiety that seems to be part of teaching. Having had some experience as a mentor for new teachers, I knew that being a cooperating teacher would be a lot of work and responsibility, but I hoped it would have professional benefits for my colleagues and me and that it might have academic benefits for my students.

Manhattan Comprehensive Night & Day High School (MCNDHS) is a public high school for 17-21 year olds. The day program consists entirely of recent immigrants from all over the world. Two-thirds of the night school students are native English speakers whose high school education has been interrupted or delayed for one reason or another. One-third are recent immigrants. Classes are in session from 11:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. Despite the differences in students' ages and in time of day when classes are offered, the program at MCNDHS is fairly traditional. Different teachers in separate classrooms teach discreet content-area courses. Teacher time and teaching assignments are allocated in the usual way giving teachers little time outside the classroom and no common time for collaborative planning. Teachers who choose to work collaboratively do so on their own time.

Method

My primary tool for reflection and data collection in this study was my journal. I began keeping a journal when I was a supervisor for new inservice teachers. I found it valuable to help me understand and reflect on what it meant for an experienced teacher like me to be in the classroom with another teacher,

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albeit, a novice. Thus, I continued keeping a journal when I became a cooperating teacher. I wrote down my initial thoughts and ideas about the prospect of taking on the role of cooperating teacher, as well as observations, struggles, and successes in working with my student teacher.

In addition to the journal, I distributed questionnaires to each of the five teachers in the school who had agreed to work with student teachers. I also tape recorded and transcribed for analysis the five cooperating teacher study group sessions that we developed for ourselves during the term. About half way through the study, I realized how valuable it might be to get the students' perceptions of having student teachers. I began to wonder if the students in our classes might be aware of any differences in their teachers as a result of the presence of student teachers. I also wanted to know if they thought there were any changes occurring in their classes vis-a-vis the presence of student teachers. So, I distributed questionnaires to the students in each class that had a student/cooperating teacher pair. At the end of the term, I interviewed my cooperating teacher colleagues to find out what they thought about the experience of being part of a cooperating/student teacher pair and meeting together with colleagues who were also in that role.

Data

I did a content analysis of these various data sources to determine how the five cooperating teachers and their students perceived changes in teaching practice as a result of the student teachers' presence as well as to discern whether and how the study group's conversation related to professional development.

My Journal

My journal reveals my initial anxiety about taking on the role of cooperating teacher. I wrote questions such as, "How can I take on the responsibility of someone looking to me for direction?" and "How will I handle the scrutiny of my own teaching?" But the journal also reveals that the experience of being a cooperating teacher may have nudged me to grow in ways that I had not been able to previously. For example, I wrote about the responsibility and stimulus of being looked to as the "expert" by my student teacher:

Some of her questions have not been so easy to answer off the top of my head. In fact, some of her questions have been my own unanswered questions that I wished I had someone to help me with. In the process of trying to help her, I have helped myself and my students.

In a journal entry about one month into the term, I wrote about the change in our classroom seating arrangement. I attributed the change to my student teacher's presence. We had been struggling with ways to improve oral participation in the ESL Beginner class. She suggested changing the seating arrangement permanently into a semi-circle of partners. Although I had routinely made temporary

changes to accommodate pair/group work, I didn't seriously consider a permanent change because I share the room with so many other teachers. With her there to help and for her benefit as a developing teacher, we made the change. I wrote in my journal, "I like the results. . . . I think it makes students feel more a part of the action of a whole." Interestingly, this feeling was echoed later by some students on their questionnaire responses.

Teacher Questionnaires

Toward the end of the term, I gave out a questionnaire to the five participating cooperating teachers. The questionnaire consisted of the following openended questions:

- √ What is your understanding of the role of the cooperating teacher?
- √ What is your understanding of the role of the student teacher?
- √ How has your class been affected by the presence of a student teacher?
- √ What effect, if any, has the experience of being a cooperating teacher had on your own practice?
- √ What do you like about having the student teacher?
- √ What do you dislike about having the student teacher?

All of the cooperating teachers' wrote about their feelings of responsibility to support and guide their student teachers. They used the words *mentor*, *model*, *guide*, *facilitator*, and *support* when asked about the role of the cooperating teacher. Each of the teachers noted specific ways in which the experience had affected her teaching. Their responses can be categorized as follows: collaboration, reflection, new ideas, preparedness, general invigoration, and confidence building. Four out of five teachers noted the benefits of collaborating with others in the teaching task. All of the teachers recognized ways in which this experience led them to reflect more or in different ways on their teaching. They all noted, too, that the experience had enabled them to consider new ideas and to add new methods to their teaching repertoires. Three out of five said they were better prepared and organized in order to help their student teachers. Finally, two out of five cooperating teachers found the experience professionally invigorating and a boost to their confidence. The following comment is illustrative of their responses:

It has been primarily invigorating. I have seen a few new ideas and approaches and it has forced me to be more focused and prepared than I might otherwise have been. [I've] reflected on some of the things I do.

Although one teacher indicated that she thought her students had taken advantage of the student teacher's inexperience by not doing the homework that had been assigned, all of the other teachers believed the class had benefited by

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exposure to new ideas, more attention, and better, more organized planning. One teacher wrote:

[The class has been] greatly improved, more organized, many new activities, ideas, a lot of good collaboration.

Student Questionnaires

In addition to the teacher questionnaire, I distributed questionnaires to the students in the five classes where there had been a cooperating teacher/student teacher pair. Approximately 80 students completed and returned questionnaires to me. I asked students what differences or changes they noticed, if any, and what they liked and disliked about having a student teacher in their class. Some of the students were unable to answer the questions on the questionnaire with any depth because of their lack of English language proficiency. Also, some students were new to the classes and therefore were unable to note any changes to the class since the student teacher arrived.

Analysis

Responses to Questionnaires

Table 1 represents both teacher and student responses to questions regarding their perceptions of change in teaching practice in their classrooms as a result of the student teachers' presence. The responses are divided into three groups: changes in technical practice, changes in teacher's affect, and impact on students.

Students noted new seating arrangements, that they often had more homework, and that their teachers seemed to have more time to prepare. Only one student noted negatively that the teacher had less time to care about every student. Another student felt just the opposite was true, that the teacher had more time to help students.

Study Group Meetings

Throughout the term, cooperating teachers met in a study group. The approximately hour-long sessions were tape recorded and transcribed. Three of the five transcripts representing roughly the beginning, middle, and end of the semester were analyzed for their content. The transcripts were analyzed by listing each topic as it arose, then labeling, counting, and categorizing them.

These collegial discussions generally addressed one of the following topics: instructional issues (directly related to teaching/learning in the teachers' classrooms), mentoring issues (concerns around the teachers' roles as cooperating teachers and their relationships with their student teachers), and professional issues (broader concerns within the profession). Classroom instructional issues were by far the most prominent topic in these teacher meetings (See Table 1). Teachers discussed, brainstormed, offered suggestions and problem solved together over a

Table 1: Perceptions of Changes in Teaching Practice

	Technical Practice	Teachers' Affect	Impact on Students
Teachers' Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Refined execution✓ New activities, ideas, approaches✓ More graded work✓ Refocus on techniques such as questioning, feedback, wait time✓ More careful preparation✓ More thoughtful planning✓ More organized	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Reaffirmed values and philosophies✓ Enjoyed sharing joys and disappointments✓ Gained awareness of own progress✓ Felt connection to a greater purpose✓ Opened up to different viewpoints✓ Invigorating✓ More reflective✓ Good collaboration✓ Renewed confidence✓ Reduced anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Students thought about their expectations of a teacher✓ Opportunity to observe students✓ Students sensed student teacher's inexperience✓ Exposure to new teaching style✓ Attention, care, and concern of two people
Students' Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Saw teacher as continuing his/her education✓ Allowed regular teacher more time to prepare✓ New seating arrangement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Regular teacher's Responsibilities made easier✓ Change of atmosphere✓ Teacher got some help	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ More homework✓ Less time to care about every student✓ Teacher has more time to help students✓ Learn more✓ Introduced to new ideas

wide variety of specific classroom concerns. Although none of these was a planned agenda item, teachers addressed issues such as vocabulary instruction, pair work, pre-reading activities, pacing of lessons, selecting appropriate materials, and dealing with latecomers. Seventy-nine percent of the first conversation focused on instructional issues, 17 percent on issues concerning the mentoring role, and 4 percent on broader professional issues such as research. Subsequent study group conversations continued to be weighted heavily toward matters of classroom instruction: 64 percent and 63 percent respectively.

On the last day of our study group, I interviewed teacher participants to find out what they thought of the experience of having a student teacher and meeting regularly as a study group. Their answers reinforced much of the data collected in the questionnaires. In general, teachers agreed that the opportunity to collaborate

with someone had provided the stimuli for meaningful reflection, the introduction of new ideas, and more careful planning and articulation of teaching methods.

Discussion

My data suggest that assuming the role of cooperating teacher with a student teacher can provide experienced teachers with a meaningful opportunity for professional growth. Responses to the questionnaires indicate that teachers and students are aware of some growth due to this experience, though it is hard to tease out whether their claims about change are due simply to the presence of the student teachers or to the combination of opportunities for collegial interaction and mentoring that the term afforded them. What is clear is that such an experience can provide a purposeful focus for thoughtful reflection and collegial support around student learning.

Analysis of study group transcripts yields some specific references to ways in which teachers believe that their practice has been enriched both by having someone else in their classrooms and by assuming the responsibility of expert mentor alongside the novice. More important, analysis of the study group discussions demonstrates that when given the opportunity and a real context for doing so, teachers use their time helping one another brainstorm and problem solve for the benefit of the students in their classrooms. As a result, they appear to gain confidence, seem less anxious, and are able to reaffirm their values, principles, and sense of purpose as teachers. In short, they seem to have become better teachers; they noticed positive change and so did students. I found that, in the long run, being a cooperating teacher wasn't extra effort; it was a better effort that proved beneficial to the students, my colleagues, and to me.

Conclusion

My study involved a small sample of teachers who were voluntarily participating as cooperating teachers in an informal study group. More extensive research of student teaching models that consciously aim to enrich the professional growth of the cooperating teacher would be helpful in determining which aspects of the relationship promote professional growth and enhance student achievement. Additionally, longitudinal studies of ways in which successful models of ongoing collaborative professional work patterns reduce stress, increase job satisfaction, and improve the quality of teaching could uncover critical pathways to retaining highly-skilled teachers in the profession. Studies that reveal best ways to structure time to allow for such collaboration need to weigh in. Further action research should be done to find out more about student perceptions of such collaboration and its impact on student performance. What is the value for students of witnessing the successful negotiation of two adult professionals in their midst? Is it an instructive

model for a working partnership? In what specific ways does this show up in the students' abilities to collaborate with classmates around learning tasks? In what ways does it affect student achievement?

I believe that my study has implications for school restructuring, professional development and evaluation policies, and teacher education programs. It suggests benefits to teachers and students of structuring teaching schedules and school schedules to incorporate teachers working together, watching each other work, giving each other feedback, and allowing time to talk about what they are seeing and learning. Collaborative problem solving, planning, and peer observations should be a regular part of a teacher's professional growth across the span of his/her career. University programs, teacher educators, and schools should work together to make the student teacher/cooperating teacher experience a professional development opportunity for both the student teacher and the cooperating experienced teacher. Toward these ends, I propose the following policies:

√ Participation as a supervising teacher should be an option for experienced teachers to fulfill professional development requirements within schools and school systems.

√ Teacher Education programs should include collegial study groups for cooperating teachers as well as student teachers. This is a built-in opportunity for meaningful, job-embedded professional growth of experienced teachers and would make Teacher Education programs more beneficial to cooperating schools, teachers, and students.

√ Schools and school systems should build time into every day for teachers at every level of the profession to work together on classroom instructional issues.

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