Voices of Cooperating Teachers:
Professional Contributions and Personal Satisfaction

By Tom Ganser & Mary Ann Wham

Student teaching has been a central feature of teacher preparation for most of the twentieth century (Ganser, 1996a; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). The perceived value of providing prospective teachers with classroom experiences under the guidance of a veteran teacher is well documented in educational literature. For example, Doyce Watts (1987) reported that practicing teachers identify student teaching as "the most valuable and helpful component of their total preparation program" (p. 151). Earlier research by James B. Conant (1963) described student teaching as "the one indisputably essential element in professional education" (p. 142). At the same time, the shortcomings associated with student teaching and other field experiences are also being scrutinized (Ganser, 1996b; Knowles & Cole, 1996; Metcalf & Kahlich, 1996).

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Marvin A. Seperson and Bruce R. Joyce (1973) reported that cooperating teachers substantially influenced the classroom behavior of student teachers, noting "The cooperating teacher apparently really is a powerful influence for good or for ill" (p. 151). More recently, Joyce (1988) has observed that "...it

is generally believed that the most influential feature of the most influential program component is the cooperating teacher" (p. 32). Ironically, there has been relatively little study about how serving as a cooperating teacher impacts the person in that capacity (Tannehill, 1989).

Teachers recognize benefits in serving as cooperating teachers (Tatel, 1996), often mirroring those reported by mentors of beginning teachers (Ganser, 1993). Working with student teachers can validate teachers by providing them with "opportunities to think about the knowledge they had acquired through the years" (Koerner, 1992, p. 53). Student teachers can also heighten their cooperating teachers' awareness of innovative instructional and management techniques (Bowers, 1994) and promote self-reflection. Finally, serving as a cooperating teacher affords teachers an opportunity to contribute to their profession.

In recent analyses of the career cycle of teachers, serving as a cooperating teacher often emerged as a profitable albeit generally unrecognized professional development experience during several career stages (Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Walling, 1994). The fact is that the over 100,000 bachelor's degrees in education awarded annually (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) involve thousands of teachers who serve as cooperating teachers. This warrants careful analysis of the impact of serving as a cooperating teacher on experienced teachers.

This paper is based on information from a survey of cooperating teachers serving in the teacher education program of a midwestern comprehensive university. The 454 respondents (response rate of 67 percent) included pre-school (n=34), elementary school (n=206), middle school (n=124), and high school (n=73) teachers assigned to regular education (n=296), special education (n=78), or inclusion (n=17) classrooms. The mean number of years of teaching experience was 17.95. Among the respondents, 244 indicated having worked during their career with students in an early field experience, 149 with students in a middle field experience occurring during a methods block, 334 with student teachers or interns, and 149 with graduate practicum students. Two hundred seventy-nine respondents indicated having received preparation for serving as a cooperating teacher through a course or workshop.

There were three sections to the survey. The first section requested demographic and background information. The second section included five Likert-scale items regarding participants' perceptions about common dimensions of field experiences (*e.g.*, level of support provided by university supervisors). The third section contained the following three questions and space for written responses:

1. What is the greatest *contribution* a cooperating teacher can make in preparing a future teacher?
2. What is the greatest *frustration* for a cooperating teacher?
3. What is greatest *satisfaction* for a cooperating teacher?

This paper focuses on a content analysis of the teachers' responses to the first and third questions.

Data Analysis

The verbatim responses to each question were prepared as a word-processed file. A text version of this file was then merged with *The Ethnograph*, a computer program designed to facilitate the analysis of qualitative data, including assigning codes to text, sorting text by codes, and retrieving coded segments of text (Seidel, Friese, & Leonard, 1995).

Working independently, each researcher read the data and developed a coding system based on emerging patterns and categories (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Next, the researchers met in order to evaluate their coding systems, to describe the criteria developed to define each category, to provide samples of each category of data, and to discuss "outlier" data. Working together, the researchers then combined their coding systems, collapsing some categories and expanding others, and reanalyzed the data based on this merged coding system.

Professional Contributions

An analysis of the respondents' comments clearly revealed that they believed working as cooperating teachers enabled them to contribute to the professional preparation of prospective teachers. In their comments, they emphasized providing teacher education students with classroom experience, serving as role models, assisting student teachers in mastering basic teaching skills, and helping them to develop a comprehensive understanding of teaching as work and as a profession.

Classroom Experience

The respondents viewed their roles in providing classroom experience as central to their service as cooperating teachers. For example, one teacher wrote, "I believe the greatest contribution that a cooperating teacher can make to future teachers is to allow them to try new ideas and methods and to allow the future teachers to fly." Some respondents believed that they best served students by providing raw, unmediated experience and avoiding anything that might "'sugar coat' the happenings in the classroom" in order to promote "practical on-the-job training." However, more commonly, respondents reported efforts to provide experiences for their student teachers that might be somewhat less realistic in order to be more educative. These respondents described working to ensure "a flexible atmosphere that is psychologically safe and encourages success," "a nurturing classroom setting," "a 'safe' place for the field study students to first teach their 'own designed' lessons," and "a positive working environment."

Several characteristics about the types of experiences they provided for students emerged among the respondents' comments. Some stressed authenticity. "No one has a realistic idea of teaching until you do it every day" wrote a cooperating teacher. The goal of one elementary teacher was to provide "the

realistic hands-on experience of working with students in a school environment" and another teacher aimed to provide students with an "honest representation of the 'real world' of teaching."

Respondents highlighted efforts to give students comprehensive experiences intended to foster an awareness of "the true nature of teaching." Comments emphasized providing future teachers with "as much information and as many different experiences and responsibilities as possible" while striving to give them "as many opportunities as possible (large group, small group, computer work, library research, parent-teacher conferences)."

Teacher Preparation Programs

Respondents often related their contributions as cooperating teachers to teacher preparation programs. They emphasized promoting experiences for students that enabled them to apply theory or to integrate theory and practice. A teacher referred to "providing the bridge between university 'book learning' and actual experience" whereas an elementary teacher emphasized that cooperating teachers must possess an "open-mindedness and willingness to help the future teacher integrate university knowledge with experience in the field." Importantly, one elementary teacher noted that cooperating teachers should help students "make the transfer from theory to practice without losing enthusiasm."

Respondents characterized the experiences they hoped to provide students as extending beyond the university or textbook. For instance, a high school teacher wrote, "The greatest contribution a cooperating teacher can make is to teach them [student teachers] the daily situations that a university may not touch on." In the view of a middle school teacher, an important goal for cooperating teachers is "showing them what the books don't mention: the on-the-job, on-your-feet thinking that has to occur to be successful." Similarly, another middle school teacher suggested that cooperating teachers strive to enable students to experience "the actual witnessing of the delicate balancing act that is teaching."

Veteran Teacher Guidance

Many respondents emphasized their goal to provide experiences that enable students to experiment with and explore teaching, even at the cost of making predictable mistakes that might have been avoided or reduced if the cooperating teacher had intervened. As one teacher noted, "It's better for them to make mistakes with you, than when they're on their own." One cooperating teacher described her efforts to give students "the freedom to explore, to fail, and to regroup."

At the same time, respondents also suggested that the students' experimentation and exploration need not occur without any intervention on the part of the cooperating teacher. For example, for a pre-school teacher her responsibilities as a cooperating teacher meant "allowing the student teacher to 'test the waters'—to create, invent, practice, succeed and fail—in an accepting atmosphere which fosters

independence through feedback and lots of practice."

Repeatedly, respondents cited the role of the cooperating teacher in promoting teacher education students' opportunities to discover and develop their own teaching style. A high school teacher suggested "allowing student teachers to experiment with many different teaching styles...to find out what style works best for them." Encouraging discovery was described in different ways, including "helping the future teacher discover and deal with his/her weaknesses and strengths," "carefully guiding student teachers to allow them to develop their strengths and teaching style," and "assisting student teachers in developing a teaching style best for themselves."

Providing feedback and constructive criticism was often linked by the respondents with the student's development as a teacher. For instance, an elementary teacher described her greatest contribution to teacher education as "being honest with constructive feedback and allowing a future teacher to take risks in your classroom, try new things." Many respondents judged helping future teachers to assess their teaching ability as their central function. One teacher described his work as a cooperating teacher as

> Assisting people who intend to be teachers to discover what their real potential as a teacher is, to discover their personal strengths and weaknesses, to enlighten their self-discovery, to help them establish their place, and to encourage them to be life-long learners.

Providing a Role Model

Woven throughout the respondents' comments were statements about their function as role models. In some cases, this modeling was portrayed as carrying out the daily tasks of teaching in an exemplary fashion:

> "Being an excellent model."
>
> "Being a competent professional."
>
> "Being an effective facilitator" and "demonstrating your caring and professionalism on a daily basis."

One teacher described "positive role modeling" as "the greatest contribution" a cooperating teacher can make. Some respondents described being a role model as an active function intended to influence students directly. This is evident in such comments as "model and guidance to mold them [students] into good teachers," "induce a feeling of commitment and pride about teaching," "imbuing an attitude of 'can do,'" and "instilling in the student teacher a love for teaching and to have them feel that they are making a contribution to society."

Comments related to role modeling revealed two other dimensions. First, role modeling was frequently associated with generalized "professionalism." A high school teacher emphasized "setting a professional example" and an elementary

teacher stressed "sharing your skills, knowledge, and standards as a professional." Second, the affective dimension of being a role model was highlighted: "being positive about teaching," "sharing my love for my job, my caring for children," and "instilling the love of teaching."

Teaching: Work and Profession

In describing their contributions to preparing teachers, the respondents highlighted several dimensions of teaching as work and as a profession. For example, a teacher suggested that her role as a cooperating teacher was to "provide the future teacher with ideas, strategies, and motivational techniques which will assist her in building confidence [so] that she will be a good, competent, and effective educator."

Some of the respondents' remarks pertained to specific teaching skills. Among these, classroom management and discipline were the most frequently mentioned. Cooperating teachers indicated that some students required extensive "guidance in developing classroom management skills, especially discipline" whereas others benefitted from help in "refining discipline methods." Other skills mentioned included setting goals, long range planning, lesson planning, transition between activities, questioning techniques and strategies, and adjusting lessons for children with exceptional needs.

Respondents often described their primary contributions to teacher education in terms of knowledge about and relationship with pupils. For one high school teacher, this meant helping student teachers to "see the students as 'real,' not as some 'textbook' persons." Two elementary teachers focused on the foundations of teacher/pupil relationships, one describing her role as "providing opportunities for real life situations with children to develop an empathy and childlike perspective" and the other as "instilling a love for children and teaching them." Respondents teaching in urban settings also stressed diversity, including "letting them see a person teaching several diverse populations of students in different ways to suit their needs."

Complementing comments that highlighted cooperating teachers' contributions in terms of teaching skills, strategies, and techniques were comments that emphasized their roles in inducting newcomers into teaching as a profession. One element of this focus was "ensuring that prospective teachers are making an 'informed choice' as to their career choice." Accordingly, respondents stressed their efforts to provide students with "a clear understanding of what the profession is." Respondents suggested this could only be achieved if cooperating teachers helped students to "see all aspects of their chosen field" and to "get involved with all aspects of education right away, to get the feel of things." Although many of these experiences were described as occurring in the classroom, respondents also pointed to "meaningful experiences not available in the classroom." Finally, some respondents described their most important contribution to teacher education as fostering

in student teachers a commitment to life-long learning ("to instill the realization that as long as you teach you will always be learning both from children and colleagues") and an openness to change ("future teachers can also be shown by older teachers that it's important to accept change").

Personal Satisfaction

This survey revealed cooperating teachers as mindful of their contribution to the preparation of teachers. The results also portrayed them as finding great personal satisfaction in serving as cooperating teachers. They eagerly shared their pleasure in witnessing and contributing to the development of prospective teachers, in enhancing their own work as teachers because of their association with teacher education students, and in serving their profession.

Witnessing Professional Development

A deep sense of satisfaction in watching the development of future teachers was stressed by many respondents. Frequently, the development was described in general terms. A high school teacher noted his delight in watching "the transformation of scared, timid student teachers into confident teachers ready to accept the challenges of their first teaching position." With a focus on learning, another high school teacher highlighted her satisfaction at seeing "the joy a student teacher gets when there is the 'aha' breakthrough with even one kid." Watching a future teacher grow in confidence was also cited as a source of satisfaction, as evident in the comments of a pre-school teacher who described "seeing the light bulb go on when the confidence kicks in for the student teacher."

Many respondents focused their comments about satisfaction on the relationship between teacher education students and their pupils. For example, a middle school teacher recalled her joy in "seeing student teacher and students connect." Several respondents also underscored their own part in the growth and development of future teachers. For one elementary teacher, it was a matter of "seeing a new teacher grow and become more self-confident, and knowing you had a part in their growth as a teacher." Another elementary teacher described

> watching the kids respond to the student teacher in a loving, caring, respectful manner, as they continue to learn and grow. Knowing that I helped this person to be the best they can be and love teaching children!

For many respondents, "seeing a student teacher grow and gain new skills due to your guidance" was a very satisfying experience.

Enhancing One's Own Competency

Respondents frequently attributed growth and development in their own work to working with teacher education students. For some, their satisfaction derived chiefly from learning new ideas, techniques, and strategies from the future teachers.

"The greatest satisfaction for a cooperating teacher," noted a high school teacher, "is when the student teacher brings and shares new and innovative ideas." An elementary teacher described some of her satisfaction in being a cooperating teacher as "having access to current literature and research in your field."

Some respondents viewed working with a teacher education student as an important source of renewal and rejuvenation. One middle school teacher wrote, "I came away with some great new ideas to add life to my curriculum." Respondents reported having benefited from "the excitement a student teacher brings to the classroom," "the freshness and enthusiasm that student teachers bring," and "the energy of a new teacher." Comments suggested that the cooperating teachers valued the perspectives teacher education students bring to the classroom. A pre-school teacher described this as "seeing the classroom functioning through another person's eyes." According to a middle school teacher, serving as a cooperating teacher "inspires one to try new ideas and look at things from another perspective."

Working as a cooperating teacher enabled teachers to reaffirm their own skills and abilities both as a cooperating teacher and as a classroom teacher. An elementary teacher described her satisfaction "when my student teachers have obtained a teaching position and communicate with me that all they gained in our time together has made the transition from student to professional easier." Focusing on his own teaching skills, a high school teacher described his satisfaction in "seeing methods you use work for the future teachers" and an elementary teacher was pleased in "showing them [student teachers] you can still have it after 27 years of teaching."

Link to Newcomers

Important sources of satisfaction for cooperating teachers also included their continuing relationships with student teachers beyond the end of the experience. A pre-school teacher highlighted her sense of satisfaction

> when student [teachers] are hired into their first teaching position. I love to hear their voice when they call to tell me about their new job!

A high school teacher stressed as most satisfying "personal and professional communication with former student teachers through the years" and another high school teacher indicated his sense of accomplishment in "having the student teacher become a teacher and still use you as a mentor."

The comments of some respondents focused on their part in "preparing someone to successfully enter my profession." "Knowing that there is still wonderful, young blood coming into our profession" was satisfying for a middle school teacher. For an elementary teacher, working with a student teacher allowed her "to know your profession is still a strong one even though we are always being criticized." Some respondents' sense of satisfaction was clearly portrayed as an opportunity for "passing the profession along" and sharing "a passion to help

students learn." One elementary teacher describe her greatest joy in being a cooperating teacher as "passing along my experience—student teachers are the future of teaching." The comments of many respondents emphasized that being a cooperating teacher provided them with a special link with their profession and with those teachers who will follow them in "teaching our children of tomorrow."

Conclusion

A plethora of research exists that supports the significant contribution made by cooperating teachers to the development of future teachers. Results of this survey indicate that teachers have much to say about their work as cooperating teachers, both with respect to promoting the development of specific teaching skills in prospective teachers and in terms of influencing their profession. They also view service as a cooperating teacher as a desirable complement to and extension of their work as classroom teachers (Ganser, Koskela, & Koskela, 1997; Koskela & Ganser, 1995).

All teacher preparation programs require the services of cooperating teachers for a variety of field experiences. It is, however, gratifying to realize that cooperating teachers also view their roles as personally and professionally valuable.

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