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Cooperating teachers' impact on preservice social studies teachers' autonomous practices: A multi-case study



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ABSTRACT

This multi-case study explores the impact of cooperating teachers (CTs) on the autonomous pedagogical practices of preservice social studies teachers at a large southeastern university. The study examines participants' written reflections, social studies teaching philosophies, lesson plans, and interview transcripts to identify how field placements and, more specifically, cooperating teachers directly influence the autonomous decision-making practices of student teachers (STs). The author will discuss the socialization of the participants and the role of the CTs in both preventing and promoting the autonomous practices of the STs as they attempted to fulfill their identified aims of education. The case will be made for a revision of field experiences to promote teacher autonomy through better reflection on the part of STs.

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Introduction

The final year in a teacher education program is critical to the effective development of autonomous in-service teachers capable of making pedagogical decisions grounded in the oft-referenced aims of education (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann 1987; Thornton, 1988). It is during these two semesters when the traditional preservice teacher takes a subject-specific, senior-level methods course, transitions into student teaching under the supervision of a certified and experienced classroom teacher, and participates in a culminating capstone course meant to intertwine the theoretical elements of education and the practical experiences of student teaching (Adler, 2008; Carter, 1989; Koeppen, 1998). Because of the level of influence such a period has on preservice teachers, explorative and empirical research that can assist teacher education programs in developing effective educators is needed.

One component of the traditional teacher education program needing scholarly attention is the role of cooperating teachers (CT) on student teachers' (STs) pedagogical practices and dispositions. More specifically, because CT's have such a lasting impact on the dispositions and pedagogical approaches of STs, research is needed to determine how CTs specifically influence the autonomous practices and attempts of STs to find their own "space" in the classroom during their culminating experience in their teacher education program (Frykholm, 1996; Misco & Hamot, 2012; Pryor, 2006). Further, since this period often has such a strong influence on the type of classroom educator a preservice teacher will ultimately become, it is critical to explore the connections STs develop and how these relationships (in this case, that between the STs and their CTs)

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socialize and professionalize preservice teachers (Evans, 1990; Misco & Hamot, 2012; Owens, 1997). The research questions this study seeks to answer, therefore, are:

1. To what extent do cooperating teachers influence the autonomous practices of preservice social studies teachers during their student teaching placement?
2. How do cooperating teachers' aims for the classroom align with those of their preservice social studies teachers?
3. To what extent are preservice social studies teachers "socialized" into a community of professional educators throughout their student teaching placement?

Theoretical framework and literature review

The present study is grounded in two key ideas: (1) the social studies is the primary subject-area for teaching students about their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy and, (2) field experiences (and, more specifically, CTs) heavily influence the growth of preservice teachers. These two themes collectively make the case for empirical research exploring how field experiences specifically within the social studies impact the experiences and development of preservice social studies teachers. The present section, thus, seeks to explore the available research on preservice *social studies* teachers' field experiences and surface the critical gap in the literature in regards to CTs.

Parker (2010) notes that the "social studies is at the center of a good school curriculum because it is where students learn to see and interpret the world – its people, places, cultures, systems, and problems; its dreams and calamities – now and long ago" (p. 3). The social studies is often charged with the task of preparing students to enter into the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) as autonomous, rational thinkers who are informed on current issues and capable of participating in evidence-based dialogue (Adler & Goodman, 1985; Cuenca, 2010; Dinkelman, 2009; Hertzberg, 1981). Many scholars, therefore, view the social studies as having different goals and objectives than other content-areas in the traditional curriculum. In other words, the social studies differs from other content-areas in that it grounds itself in citizenship and reform-oriented aims that promote equality and equity through discussions on critical and current issues and events in a manner that prepares citizens to enter into a pluralist society.

The unique nature of the social studies is essential for teacher education to acknowledge because it means that preservice social studies teachers must be prepared differently than PSTs in the other subject-areas. Scholars have taken note of this and, subsequently, a fruitful and evolving body of literature detailing the preparation specifically of preservice social studies teachers has become prominent in recent decades. Scholars have begun to study the perceptions of preservice social studies teachers (Barton, 2012; Crowe, Hawley, & Brooks, 2012), the methods courses they take within their programs (Adler, 2008), and the pedagogical content knowledge of social studies PSTs (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987; Salinas, Bellows, & Liaw, 2011).

Despite such research, there exists a component of social studies teacher education programs that has received limited attention; that of the field experience. In her review of the research conducted on field experiences within the field of social studies education, Adler (2008) notes that "though limited, research on the field experience component of teacher education programs supports the findings that collaboration between schools and universities can have a positive effect on the beliefs and practices of both in-service and preservice teachers" (p. 336). In this sense, what has been found – although informative and certainly useful to teacher education programs – is limited in both its scope and depth. This is despite a call by many scholars for a renewed interest and expanding body of literature on the field placements of preservice social studies teachers (Adler, 2008; Koepfen, 1998). What does exist, however, is certainly telling in regards to the influential nature of the social studies field placement.

For instance, Fehn and Koepfen (1998) found that preservice social studies teachers were often socialized to traditional modes of pedagogy within their field experiences in a manner that counteracted their university training (a finding mirroring the findings of Zeichner and Tabachnick's work on teacher socialization). More specifically, they found that an array of variables (this including their CTs) presented them with a more "realistic" version of teaching conflicting with the practices discussed in their coursework. Cole and Knowles (1993) similarly describe how "[student teachers] become disillusioned by the realities of teaching and schools" (p. 469). Field placements, thus, have shown to have a critical and lasting impact on the autonomous thinking and practices of STs.

Specific to the influence of CTs, Zevin (1974) found preservice social studies teachers often imitate their CT's classroom practices regardless of what their university professors or field instructors believed about such forms of pedagogy. In this sense, "as the student teachers developed, they conformed more and more closely to the interaction patterns of the teachers with whom they worked" (p. 8). Reflecting these findings, Copeland (1980)'s found similarities between ST's methods of teaching and those of their CTs. Both Zevin and Copeland, thus, found that CT's had a noticeable impact on the development of STs. Although outside of the social studies, Rozelle and Wilson (2012) more recently found that CT's beliefs about teaching heavily influenced those of their PSTs. Rozelle and Wilson (2012), more specifically, refer to preservice teachers as "reproducers" of pedagogical practices whose "visions of good teaching grow toward their cooperating teachers" (p. 1203). Moreover, the authors prove that field placements and CTs are largely influential on PSTs.

Ultimately, what is clear is that CTs in all content-areas have a strong impact on PST's beliefs toward the field and practices as teachers (Anderson, 2007; Montgomery, 1994; Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012;

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