The paired-placement of student teachers: An alternative to traditional placements in secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of the paired-placement of student teachers in secondary school settings. Would such placements foster the learning and development of student teachers and the learning of their pupils? Participants were 23 student teachers who were placed as partners, their mentor teachers, and a sample of the pupils in their classes. After 15 weeks of student teaching, the participants were interviewed about (a) the perceived strengths and weakness of paired-placements, and (b) the relationships that developed between the student teachers and with their mentor teacher. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts went through a process of open coding followed by the development of coding instruments, which were used to assess the level of collaboration of the student teachers during planning and teaching. In addition, the transcripts were used to conduct a cost benefit analysis of paired-placements. Results indicated that pair-placed student teachers enjoyed a rich learning experience because of the tensions, dialog, and reflections that grew out of being placed with a peer. The secondary settings allowed for a combination of solo and team teaching. Results also suggested that pupil learning was facilitated by having two student teachers.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years improving the quality and extent of prospective teachers' field experiences has become the centerpiece of teacher education reform (Latham & Vogt, 2007; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Smith, 2004; Young, Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Erickson, 2005). Despite such efforts, the general perception remains unchanged, that learning to teach is an individual endeavor, teachers should develop their own style of teaching, and that good teachers work alone (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). It appears that although beginning teachers are spending more time in schools during teacher education, the "epistemological base" of teaching has not been significantly changed or enhanced (Whitehead &

Fitzgerald, 2006). As in the past, beginning teachers tend to focus on survival and receiving a positive evaluation rather than on risk taking and learning (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; see also Sundli, 2007).

New models of field experience are needed, ones that challenge established practices and understandings about teaching and learning to teach. In particular, as Howey and Zimpher (1999) have argued, efforts need to be directed toward helping beginning teachers learn how to work effectively with other teachers. The urgency of the situation is underscored by the increasing difficulty of finding school placements for beginning teachers, let alone with highly effective and skilled teachers (Selwyn, 2007).

Insights useful for identifying promising alternative models of student teaching arise from several sources. Four insights strike us as particularly important: (1) growing evidence suggests that "beginning teachers are capable of sophisticated thinking from early on" in their

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involvement with children (Watzke, 2007, p. 117); (2) there is increasing recognition of the often unrealized power of professional dialogue to support teacher learning (Craig, 2007) coupled with greater understanding of how school structures and established practices limit that power (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006); (3) there is strong evidence that collaboration among teachers promotes teacher efficacy and, further, that peer coaching holds particular promise for encouraging teacher development (Ross & Bruce, 2007); and finally (4) children must be shown to benefit from whatever models are developed.

Among the alternative models of field experience being explored that attend in varying degrees to these insights are "paired teaching placements" (Smith, 2004), "peer mentoring" (Forbes, 2004), and "critical partnerships" (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005), where pre-service teachers mentor one another (Cornu, 2005). A related concept is professional learning communities—teachers who collaborate for the primary purposes of improving student learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). While these models and approaches vary, the underlying assumption unifying them is that "Teacher learning is facilitated in collaborative cultures, as teachers learn with and from one another and feelings of isolation experienced by staff are reduced" (Cornu, 2005, pp. 356–57). This view is strongly supported by studies of team teaching (Anderson & Speck, 1998), professional development (Wilson & Berne, 1999), and of teacher learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). In summary, research on team teaching, professional development, and collaboration supports the educational value of the paired-placement of student teachers (Sorensen, 2004).

Building upon and extending two previous studies (Bullough et al., 2003, 2002), this study involves "partnership" or "paired" teaching, during which two beginning teachers share a placement and a mentor teacher and together gradually assuming the full responsibilities of teaching. Unlike the first two studies, this study is of student teachers in secondary rather than elementary schools. Specific research questions were: (a) in what ways does the secondary setting open or close opportunities for beginning teacher learning through the paired teaching model? (b) given the chance to develop their own styles of collaboration, what patterns would develop between student teaching teams? and (c) what are the costs and benefits of the paired-placement of student teachers in secondary settings?

The model presented here stands in stark contrast to other approaches that team new teachers. For example, Smith (2004) created a hierarchy of a lead trainee-teacher and a back-up trainee-teacher, which formalized turn-taking when teaching, and included provision for each teacher to enact both roles. The lead teacher planned the lessons taught and the mentor teacher, rather than the peer, gave feedback. Thus, the back-up teacher functioned as an aide under the assumption that by observing the lead teacher—by having vicarious experience—something of benefit would be gained. Results from this study revealed a number of difficulties. In particular, the pairs were not supposed to engage in discussion of teaching, yet each desired critical feedback from their peer. It appears that the model actually limited opportunities for engagement. In contrast, Parsons and Stephenson (2005) placed two students in a shared practicum but structured interaction through scripted discussion guides. This approach may have prevented practicum students from entering into honest dialogue about their practice and development, which prompted Parsons and Stephenson (2005) to suggest that future research focus less on structured tasks and more on the collaborative interaction. We took this suggestion seriously and decided not to control in any strong sense what the paired teachers did or what the cooperating or mentor teachers did with and for their student teachers. This decision was supported, in part, by recognition that mentoring is highly idiosyncratic (Martin, 1997) as well as by our desire to maximize variation across participating teams. Also, in this way we thought we could check whether or not the claim, noted above, that the "epistemological base" of student teachers (Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2006) remains intact within secondary schools. There are important implications for university-based teacher educators and their involvement in schools if this claim holds true.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study is part of a practice-based research agenda as suggested by Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb (2007), who observed that within such an agenda the "lines between research and practice often blur" (p. 6), the result of iterative cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign. Using interview data and qualitative methods we explored the experiences of 26 pair-placed student teachers, their mentors, and some of their pupils.

2.2. Context

The study was conducted at Brigham Young University, a private university. Most students in the teacher education program at BYU share a religious faith and many of the same values, a point to which we will refer later.

The student teachers in this study were placed in secondary schools during the last semester of a 4-year undergraduate teacher education program. Each of the placement schools was in close proximity to the university and had been the site of numerous placements for student teachers over time. Pupils, mentor teachers, and administrators were accustomed to working with student teachers although not all held favorable opinions of the value of this work.

2.3. Participants

Twenty-six secondary social studies candidates were assigned to student teach with a partner. Some team members were acquainted with one another, having taken courses together in some cases, but most did not know their partner before being assigned as a pair. All volunteered to be part of a student teaching team. Each team