REFLECTIONS OF COOPERATING TEACHERS REGARDING STRATEGIES FOR FUTURE SUPERVISING ASSIGNMENTS

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Abstract

Three cooperating teachers were asked to reflect on what, if anything, they would do differently in a future student-teacher supervisory assignment. Results show that all three cooperating teachers indicated that they would make changes regarding future supervision of their student teachers. These recommended strategies, which were arranged by the researcher into five categories, are consistent with the tactics promoted in the literature. Also, each of the cooperating teachers stated that reflection on the literature and the past experience with their student teacher was a major contributing influence to the changes they suggested for future supervisory approaches.

Student teaching has long been considered the capstone experience in preservice teacher training (Golland, 1998; Nagel & Smith, 1997; Veal & Rikard, 1998). A chief aim of this experience is to enhance the instructional ability of student teachers in order to better prepare them for an independent teaching assignment (Golland, 1998; Morgan, 1999; Weaver & Stanulis, 1996). Cooperating teachers, or mentors, have a crucial influence in this experience (Golland, 1998; Nagel & Smith, 1997; Stanulis, 1994; Veal & Rikard, 1998).

Cooperating teachers greatly influence the preparation of student teachers in the understanding of how to teach (Morgan, 1999; Nagel & Smith, 1997). The foundation of this influence is rooted in the fact that cooperating teachers and student teachers work closely on a daily basis (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Based on this close working relationship, cooperating teachers contribute to the pedagogical ability of student teachers and have a significant role in shaping other professional beliefs and practices (Stanulis, 1994). Consequently, cooperating teachers are in an excellent position to help create a firm basis for the future professional success of student teachers (Nagel & Smith, 1997).

While the literature (e.g., Golland, 1998; Nagel & Smith, 1997; Stanulis, 1994; Veal & Rikard, 1998) has demonstrated the wide ranging influence cooperating teachers have in helping student teachers develop, Stanulis (1994) has suggested that many cooperating teachers have difficulty making this assistance explicit. Stanulis indicated that although cooperating teachers make “many complex decisions every day, they often cannot articulate what they
know and how they choose a particular decision from their repertoire” (p. 31). This inability to articulate not only applies to ideas and activities useful in the classroom but also to strategies used in the supervision of student teachers.

Based on the significance of the cooperating teacher in the preservice teaching experience and the potential impact of the articulation of cooperating teachers’ supervisory experiences and suggestions for the future, this study had two purposes. The first purpose of this investigation was to present a rich description of the perceptions of three cooperating teachers regarding changes in strategies that they intend to employ with future student teachers. The second purpose was to ascertain why, in the opinion of the cooperating teachers, they would or would not make changes in future supervision of student teachers.

The Study

Theoretical Framework

The use of reflection is one means of aiding cooperating teachers in articulating their thoughts regarding the supervisory experiences they have had with their student teachers as well as supervisory strategies they wish to employ in the future. Reflection draws on a constructivist view of knowledge whereby cooperating teachers can thoughtfully review their experiences in order to fully understand and value their professional routine (Collier, 1999; Thomas & Montgomery, 1998). In addition to benefiting the individuals who are having the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, shared reflection can bring new understandings and helpful suggestions to fellow practitioners (Grimmett, 1989). Reflection is potentially mutually beneficial to cooperating teachers as well as those who have an opportunity to share these reflections.

Research Context and Initial Data Collection Strategies

Three teachers, who had recently been cooperating teachers, took a master’s level college course entitled *Supervision of Student Teachers*. Two of the cooperating teachers had student teachers in the fall of 1998, and the other had a student teacher in the spring of 1999. Since they had recently supervised student teachers, they were allowed to participate in an out-of-class, teacher-directed, independent course program. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for this course, the three former cooperating teachers were required to read the book *Supervising Student Teachers the Professional Way* (Henry & Beasley, 1996).

Shortly after completion of the course, and for the purposes of this study, the cooperating teachers were asked to voluntarily respond to the following questions: Would you do anything differently the next time you have a student teacher? If so, what would you do, and why would you do it? If not, why wouldn’t you change?

All three cooperating teachers agreed to participate. The data consisted of the written responses to the questions listed above from the three cooperating teachers as well as information accumulated through separate follow-up interviews with each of them. The responses were analyzed and categorized into five areas. Some of the actual responses are presented in the findings section of this article in order to present a rich description of the reflections of the cooperating teachers. Pseudonyms are used in place of the actual names of the cooperating teachers.

Participants

A non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling, was used. The purpose of this sampling procedure was to choose “information-rich key informants” who were likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena being investigated (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 397). The intent was to select informants who had current exposure to
literature regarding the supervision of student teachers as well as recent experience as cooperating teachers.

As mentioned previously, the participants, or informants, consisted of three cooperating teachers who had recently supervised student teachers and had taken an independent study course centering on the supervision of student teachers. Since the participants worked independently, they had no contact with each other during this course. In fact, they did not know each other. They not only worked in different schools but also in different school districts. One cooperating teacher worked in a parochial school and taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade language arts. The second cooperating teacher taught seventh, eighth, and ninth grade science in a public junior high school. The third cooperating teacher was a self-contained fourth grade teacher in a public elementary school.

Although the three cooperating teachers did not know or have contacts with one another during this course, they had much in common. All three were female; all had a master’s degree in education; all had accumulated between 5 to 10 years of teaching experience; and all were considered and recommended by their principals as “master” teachers. The three cooperating teachers in this study worked in schools that are classified as urban. Another similarity centered on the fact that this was their first experience in supervising a student teacher.

All three of the participants had very enjoyable experiences as cooperating teachers. In their view, the student teachers who were assigned to them did outstanding jobs. All three cooperating teachers expressed the sentiment that their student teachers had very few difficulties handling their responsibilities. As a result of these positive experiences, all three were eager to continue supervising student teachers in the future.

Data Collection

To gain a deep understanding of the perspectives of the participants in order to enhance design validity and minimize researcher bias (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), a number of strategies were employed. The initial responses from the participants were in writing and the follow-up interviews were tape recorded. In addition, a peer debriefer was used to verify the authenticity of the initial responses, facilitate the logical analysis of the data, and assist with the interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Using an inductive method of organizing the data by initially coding and indexing the data (Delamont, 1992; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), data analysis began upon receipt of the written responses from the cooperating teachers. This process of coding and indexing the data continued throughout the interview process. As the process continued, topics and categories emerged through the constant comparative method (McMillan & Schumacher). As the data were explored, the researcher combined key quotations in order to provide a rich description of the cooperating teachers’ perceptions of strategies they would utilize in the supervision of future student teachers.

Findings

After participating in an independent study course that required exposure to literature and reflection on their supervisory experiences, three cooperating teachers responded to questions regarding any changes they might make regarding supervising future student teachers. All three cooperating teachers indicated that they would make changes regarding the future supervision of student teachers.

It is significant to note that all three cooperating teachers stressed that reading the book and reflecting on the experiences they had with their student teachers served as the impetus to suggest future changes in their supervision of student teachers. The following comment of
Ms. Jesse, one of the cooperating teachers, summarized the views of the other two cooperating teachers:

_I had a wonderful experience with my student teacher. She was well prepared for student teaching, and she will be a successful teacher. Initially, I would have stated that I would not do anything differently with my next student teacher. However, after reading the book and thinking about my experiences with my student teacher, I am going to do a few things differently. I am glad I had this opportunity._

The changes that the cooperating teachers indicated they would make in the future were categorized by the researcher into the following five areas:

- Preparing for the Arrival of the Student Teacher
- Working Cooperatively With the Student Teacher
- Communicating With the Student Teacher
- Structured Observations
- Student Teacher Participation Outside the Classroom

In the subsections that follow, these five areas of recommended change are explored by presenting some of the corresponding responses made by the cooperating teachers.

**Preparing for the Arrival of the Student Teacher**

Only one of the cooperating teachers discussed the issue of preparing for the arrival of the student teacher. This may be due to the fact that of the three cooperating teachers, Ms. White was the only cooperating teacher who was assigned a student teacher for the spring semester. The other two cooperating teachers were assigned student teachers in the beginning of the school year. The beginning of the school year usually contains an orientation period whereby student teachers can be introduced to parents at an open house and to students at the beginning of their first classes. By contrast, the spring semester does not have structured situations suitable for appropriate introductions.

Regardless of the reason, Ms. White believed that students and parents needed enhanced preparation for the arrival of the student teacher. Ms. White voiced her concern over the arrival of her student teacher in this way:

_I met the student teacher one afternoon, and she arrived in my classroom the very next day. My students were not aware of her, her role, her responsibility, and so forth. I feel this was an injustice to them. In the future, my students and their parents will be made aware of a student teacher’s presence, responsibility, and role before she steps a foot in my room._

**Working Cooperatively with the Student Teacher**

One area marked for improvement by all three of the cooperating teachers was working cooperatively with the student teacher. Ms. Dannon indicated that she needed to increase the amount of time planning along with the student teacher. Ms. Dannon stated that in the beginning of the student teacher’s experience:

_We would discuss the content to be covered, and she would plan the lessons on her own time. Then, I would review the lesson plan, and then she would teach. Now, I feel that we should have sat down together and planned the activities and assessments as a team. This would have increased her confidence and would have allowed for more discussion about the specific needs of the pupils in our class._

Ms. Jesse concurred with the importance of joint planning. In fact, Ms. Jesse believed that she “must spend much more time jointly planning with her student teacher.” Ms. Jesse
added that “I would like to jointly develop some long-range plans as well as daily-lesson plans with my student teacher.” In addition to joint lesson planning, Ms. Jesse commented on the significance of sharing and developing instructional materials with the student teacher in the following manner:

I intend to share the materials that I have collected over the years, but I will also ask that she find alternate materials that can be used. Since our school has Internet access, I would like to introduce her to some sites that I have found helpful.

Ms. White mentioned working cooperatively with the student teacher in a different manner. Ms. White asserted that she will be more cautious regarding allowing her student teacher to assume full teaching responsibilities so quickly. She emphasized the situation would be more beneficial to her student teacher and the class if the student teacher was eased into assuming total instructional responsibilities. For example, Ms. White suggested that “team teaching and one-on-one tutoring with students during class time would better prepare her for full-time teaching responsibilities.”

Communicating with the Student Teacher

Another area of enhancement, cited by all three of the cooperating teachers, was the area of communicating with the student teacher. Ms. Jesse expressed concern over increasing formal communication when she stated:

Another change I plan to make with my student teacher is to spend more time in supervisory conferences, especially developmental conferences. I like the idea of outlining general topics that would be discussed during developmental conferences, and I plan to design a worksheet using these topics to aid in this type of a conference. I would also like to spend more time in summary conferences, getting a feel for how my student teacher evaluated herself as well as reviewing my evaluation of her.

Ms. Dannon expressed the need for communication in a different way. In the following quotation, Ms. Dannon verbalized her beliefs regarding communication with her student teacher:

I need to improve my method of providing feedback to the student teacher. I do not feel that I provided enough constructive criticism because I did not want to damage the student teacher’s self esteem. I wanted her to feel confident; therefore, I often held back suggestions which may have made lessons more effective. I now realize that the way to build confidence in student teachers is to help them teach effectively, and providing feedback (both positive and negative) is the only way that they can grow professionally.

Ms. White agreed with the notion of improving communication with the student teacher. In fact, she felt that “student teachers need to get constant feedback even from the students.” Ms. White elaborated on this position when she asserted that “just having my student teacher evaluated by me, my principal, and her college supervisor was not enough. To really understand the scope of the teaching profession, she needs to understand the students’ viewpoint.”

Structured Observations

All three cooperating teachers believed it would be advantageous to have the student teachers formally observe other teachers. Ms. White fully agreed with the concept of establishing structured observations and she pointed out, “more time needs to be spent on observations of other teachers to allow the student teacher to see other ways of handling situations.” Part of the difficulty scheduling these observations was brought out by Ms. White in the following statement:
The student teacher needs to be reassured there will be ample time to complete the required number of teaching hours. This is what occurred in my first experience. My student teacher’s concerns over completing her teaching requirements caused her and me to agree to allow her to begin teaching earlier than necessary. Once this tension over teaching requirements is resolved, then a time line can be set that could include structured observations.

Ms. Jesse agreed with the concept of scheduling structured observations for teachers. Ms. Jesse described the procedures she will use in scheduling these observations as follows:

While it is important that she observes in my classroom to become comfortable with the daily routine, I now feel it is equally important that she observes other teachers as well. Not only will I try to schedule many observations, I will also conduct pre- and post-observation conferences. Pre-observation conferences will be used to outline the objectives of the classroom as well as answer any questions that may arise. Post-observation conferences will allow my student teacher to discuss what she has observed as well as share information that may allow her to adjust some of her own teaching practices.

Ms. Dannon added to the belief in the importance of having structured observations when she described the situation that occurred with her student teacher and the changes she will make in the future:

I did arrange for the student teacher to observe two teachers who were teaching different age groups. However, my intent was for her to get a feeling for other grade levels. I did not take into consideration having her watch for the specific strengths of those teachers. Now, I do feel this is an excellent way to help the student teacher to build a repertoire of ideas for the future.

Student Teacher Participation in Activities Outside the Classroom

One of the cooperating teachers mentioned the importance of having students participate in outside the classroom activities, and another cooperating teacher stressed the need to increase a student teacher’s involvement in activities outside the classroom. Ms. Dannon phrased the meaningfulness of involvement outside the classroom by commenting:

The student teacher must realize that being a teacher means more than just teaching. Student teachers must be introduced to the day-to-day management of a school such as: duty, field trips, extra curricular activities, faculty meetings, and professional development seminars. Participation in these activities introduces the student teacher to the hectic role of the teacher. It also allows them to get to know the pupils and the school community more intimately. These experiences also allow the student teacher to contribute her other skills and talents to the school.

Ms. Jesse, a junior high school cooperating teacher, perceived that she did not adequately guide the student teacher in areas outside the classroom. She viewed her experience and outlined her future plans in the following manner:

Another area where I felt deficient was in the realm of encouraging participation in activities outside the classroom. I intend to ask my next student teacher to accompany me when I have hall and bus duty. I would like her to be present at parent conferences and open house. I think it is important that she participates in the report card conferences as well. I intend to invite her to attend some junior high and high school football games with me as well as chaperoning the homecoming dance.
Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

From a practical viewpoint, the five categories generated by the cooperating teachers appear to present common-sense approaches regarding the supervision of student teachers. For example, it seems logical that cooperating teachers should fully prepare their constituents for the arrival of the student teachers. Furthermore, once student teachers arrive, it is reasonable that cooperating teachers strive to work cooperatively and communicate effectively with them. In addition, cooperating teachers should endeavor to extend their influence beyond the classroom into areas such as structuring observations and arranging duty and extracurricular experiences.

Further analysis of these categories indicates that these reflections are not only pragmatic but also in agreement with strategies advocated in the educational literature. For example, information presented in articles by Babkie (1998), Gotliffe (1994), Graham (1996), Ludwig (1994), and Rose (1995) support the tactics suggested in the reflections of the cooperating teachers regarding the supervision of student teachers.

It is important to understand that although the strategies described in each of these categories were both logical and in conjunction with the literature, these three cooperating teachers believed they could improve in several of these areas. Since these perceptions were made by beginning cooperating teachers, practitioners such as inexperienced cooperating teachers and those involved in the training of cooperating teachers may benefit by reviewing the experiences and strategies recommended by the participants in this study.

Although this study presents the perceptions of an understudied population, the findings are limited to three beginning cooperating teachers who were exposed to professional literature and had successful experiences in supervising their student teachers. Future qualitative research that would focus on the reflections of a larger or more representative sample of cooperating teachers may add to the lived experiences presented in this study and fully capture the essence of the experience of supervising a student teacher.

It is interesting that although all three cooperating teachers had positive experiences with their student teachers, all listed new strategies they would employ the next time they supervised a student teacher. Based on their success with their student teachers, one might have predicted that they would opt to repeat their previous experience. In rejecting the path of status quo, each of the cooperating teachers after reflection decided to be proactive and consider some changes in the procedures utilized in the supervision of their student teachers.

The time given to reflection may have served as a catalyst for the proactive stance maintained by the cooperating teachers. Each of the cooperating teachers indicated they were appreciative of being placed in a position where they had the opportunity to spend time reflecting on the book, Supervising Teachers the Professional Way, and their actual experiences with the student teachers. In addition, each commented that the information in the book and the earnest reflection of their experiences with their student teachers led them to consider doing things differently in the future. In effect, these three cooperating teachers stated that it was beneficial for them to take the opportunity to read professional literature and to reflect on their supervisory experiences prior to their next student-teacher assignment.

The benefits of the professional development opportunity reported by the cooperating teachers raises some issues regarding the training of cooperating teachers. The literature has very little to say about the benefits of training and on-going professional development of cooperating teachers. Henry and Beasley (1996) reported that the qualifications and training of cooperating teachers vary from state to state. Henry and Beasley added the selection for cooperating teachers deviates from one college to another based on degrees earned, teaching experiences, and special courses in supervising student teachers. There are perceived benefits of professional development reported by the participants in this study. There is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the advantages of professional development of cooperating teachers. Future quantitative research into areas such as the effects of the training and on-going professional development on the supervisory skills of cooperating teachers is needed and would be a valuable follow up to this study.
Conclusion

The significance of the function of the cooperating teacher is well documented in the literature. For example, Costa and Garmston (1987) suggested that cooperating teachers have the opportunity to model appropriate behavior, pass on tools of the trade, and work with student teachers in guiding their thinking about the teaching/learning experience as well as how to apply that information to future actions. The importance of the role of cooperating teachers in supervising student teachers, understanding the views of cooperating teachers is essential to fully comprehending the essence of the supervisory experience.

The reflections of the three cooperating teachers in this study offer some suggestions to practitioners regarding the supervision of student teachers that are both practical and in agreement with the literature. The presentation of these suggestions offers practitioners some advice for future supervisory experiences. Henry and Beasley (1996) made the point that the more cooperating teachers know about field experiences, the better the possibility of their making sound judgments regarding the supervision of student teachers. Future qualitative research that would incorporate the perceptions of a more comprehensive or diverse sample of cooperating teachers would add to the findings of this study and is recommended to thoroughly understand the lived experiences of these supervisors.

It is interesting to note, all three cooperating teachers agreed that the professional opportunity to which they were exposed would be beneficial to them in future experiences with student teachers. This reaction offers some support regarding the on-going professional development of cooperating teachers in regard to the supervision of student teachers. The literature is scarce regarding the benefits of the training and professional development of cooperating teachers.

Based on the significance of the role of the cooperating teacher in the student teaching experience (Costa & Garmston, 1987; Nagel & Smith, 1997; Stanulis, 1994; Veal & Smith, 1998), the implication of the importance of training cooperating teachers reported in this study, and the lack of empirical evidence regarding the benefits of training cooperating teachers, future research regarding the effects of the training and on-going professional development of cooperating teachers on the supervisory experience of student teachers is highly recommended. In addition, quantitative research of this nature would comprise a useful complement to this study.

References


