

# Co-Teaching: Enhancing the Student Teaching Experience

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**Abstract:** Most institutions preparing future teachers haven't significantly changed the student teaching portion of their program for many decades. This paper highlights the impact of a co-teaching approach in student teaching, specifically through the eyes of two teacher candidates. The qualitative findings related specifically to outcomes for teacher candidates utilizing a co-teaching model of student teaching will be shared. The co-teaching model of student teaching allows two professionally prepared educators to work collaboratively to best meet the diverse learning needs of students. This emerging practice of co-teaching in student teaching holds great promise in transforming the educational landscape for partnering universities and school districts

## *Introduction*

The student teaching experience is one of the most influential and powerful phases of teacher preparation for prospective teachers. While student teaching expectations vary across institutions, almost all traditional teacher preparation programs culminate in a student teaching experience. A mainstay of teacher preparation, student teaching has remained relatively unchanged over the course of the last 100 years (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Traditionally prepared teacher candidates typically spend their initial weeks as a silent observer, gradually assuming the role of teaching, leading up to full responsibility in the classroom. Often, teacher candidates are left alone or at a minimum, unassisted in a classroom as they take on this full responsibility. Given the increasing diversity of today's classrooms and the prevalence of teacher accountability initiatives, it is imperative that each element of teacher preparation, including the student teaching experience is examined. The traditional model of learning to teach in isolation should no longer be an unquestioned practice. Indeed the time is ripe for institutions of higher education to re-examine and enhance the student teaching experience. It is time for teacher preparation programs to view the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate as partners where the student teaching experience allows the best teachers to mentor teacher candidates.

One promising alternative to the traditional model of student teaching is to implement a co-teaching model. This paper will highlight the major differences between a traditional and a co-teaching model of student teaching, and will provide data on the proven benefits of co-teaching for teacher candidates.

## *Defining Co-Teaching*

As colleges and universities seek ways to enhance their teacher preparation programs, integrating co-teaching strategies into the student teaching experience has gained national attention (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008; Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2007; Heck, Bacharach, Dahlberg, Ofstedal, Mann & Wellik, 2007; Heck, Bacharach, Ofstedal, Mann, Wellik, & Dahlberg, 2006; Perl, Maughmer, & McQueen, 1999). In a co-teaching experience, the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate collaboratively plan and deliver instruction from the very beginning of the experience. Cooperating teachers are taught to make their instructional decisions more explicit in order to make the invisible workings of the classroom more visible to the teacher candidate. As the experience continues, the pair seamlessly alternate between assisting and/or leading the planning, teaching, and evaluation. As this occurs, the cooperating teacher partners with the student teacher rather than giving away responsibility for the classroom. This enhances the learning opportunities for students, combines the knowledge and strengths of both teachers, and models a positive adult working relationship.

There are many differences between a traditional model of student teaching and co-teaching. These include:

- ***Involvement.*** One clear distinction between a traditional and a co-taught student teaching experience is the level of involvement of the participants. In a traditional model, often one teacher is passive while the other is leading instruction. In co-teaching, both teachers are actively involved and engaged.
- ***Preparation.*** In a traditional model of student teaching, while there might be some initial training provided to cooperating teachers, there is rarely preparation of the cooperating teacher/teacher candidate dyad. In co-teaching, we not only prepare cooperating teachers to host a teacher candidate, we recommend that the pair come to a workshop where they begin to practice the communication and collaboration skills that are necessary for the co-teaching partnership to be effective.
- ***Leading & Full-Time Instruction.*** Almost all teacher education programs have identified minimum requirements for both the length of the student teaching experience and the number of days or weeks the candidate should take over the entire classroom. In a co-teaching experience, however, the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate share the role of lead teacher. All candidates are allowed opportunities to solo teach, but through the combination of solo and co-teaching, candidates prepared using this model often teach far more than candidates prepared using the traditional model of student teaching.
- ***Introductions & Welcoming.*** A critical element in the success of any student teaching experience is how the teacher candidate is viewed by the students. In co-teaching cooperating teachers are instructed to introduce their candidate as a teacher candidate or co-teacher, so the first word the students hear is teacher. Cooperating teachers are encouraged and expected to incorporate the teacher candidate into the classroom routines and instruction from the very first day.
- ***Planning.*** In a traditional student teaching experience, teacher candidates generally plan lessons in isolation, presenting them to their cooperating teacher in advance of delivering the lesson. In co-teaching, however, the pair is expected to identify a specific planning time where the primary focus includes the details of how, when, and which co-teaching strategies will be used for upcoming lessons. Teacher candidates will spend additional time planning for their part in each lesson. In the early stages of the experience the cooperating teacher leads the planning. As the term progresses the teacher candidate assumes more responsibility, ultimately taking the lead in planning. Pairs of cooperating teachers and teacher candidates are not expected to use co-teaching for every lesson, but determine when and which strategies would be most useful in assisting student learning.
- ***Modeling and Coaching.*** Often in traditional student teaching, cooperating teachers expect teacher candidates to be skilled in various instructional strategies, lesson planning, and classroom management techniques; possessing the ability to take over all aspects of the teaching day after weeks of observation. In the co-teaching experience, cooperating teachers are taught to provide modeling and coaching, making invisible skills visible to the teacher candidate. Co-teaching allows teacher candidates the time to practice instructional and management strategies with the help and support of their cooperating teacher. Rather than being left to sink or swim, teacher candidates in a co-teaching experience are provided with the mentoring they need to become confident in their ability to manage all aspect of the classroom.
- ***Power Differential.*** In any student teaching model a power differential between the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate exists. This power differential is rarely addressed in a traditional student teaching experience. In a co-teaching model, however, cooperating teachers and teacher candidates are taught to address issues of parity and gain experience in how to work as a team. Teacher candidates are empowered to find their voice and contribute to the partnership while cooperating teachers are encouraged to be open to the ideas and contributions of the candidate. The attitude that “we are both teaching” is pivotal to the success of the pair.

### ***Co-teaching Findings***

Through a Teacher Quality Enhancement grant from the U.S. Department of Education, St. Cloud State University in Minnesota has studied the impact of shifting from a traditional to a co-teaching model of student teaching. Results from three years of study on the use of co-teaching in student teaching demonstrate an increase in academic achievement for K-6 students in co-taught classrooms (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, under revision; Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2007), as well as a positive impact on cooperating teachers (Heck, Bacharach, &

Dahlberg, 2007) and university supervisors (Bergren-Mann & Wellik, 2008). This article will explore the qualitative findings related specifically to outcomes for teacher candidates utilizing a co-teaching model of student teaching.

Qualitative data have been collected from teacher candidates involved in the co-teaching initiative over a three year period via focus groups, self-reported end-of-experience surveys, and self-reflective journal entries. Nearly 150 teacher candidates participated in focus groups, and more than 200 teacher candidates completed the on-line end-of-experience survey and self-reflective journaling. Compiling the data from these two sources, it is clear that the element of central importance to teacher candidates is what they described as feeling like a *real teacher* as a result of their co-teaching experiences. Unlike the medical professions, education does not have a white coat ceremony to mark a student's transition from preservice study to clinical practice and experience. Traditionally, teacher candidates have been introduced to classrooms of learners as a student teacher, identifying them as someone with less expertise and demanding less respect than a *real teacher*. In a co-teaching model of student teaching, candidates are introduced as teacher candidates or co-teachers. This subtle shift in language has a tremendous impact on learners by merely changing the first word from student to teacher, thereby shifting the image of this addition to the classroom from an amateur to a professional. Teacher candidates using co-teaching are expected to become actively involved in some aspect of the classroom on the first day, moving them from silent observer at the back of the room to active participant, giving them additional credibility in the eyes of their students. As one teacher candidate put it, "The strong bond you have with your co-teacher is just amazing. You truly do feel that you are the second teacher in the room, not a student teacher." Cooperating teachers agree. One experienced cooperating teacher writes, "It was just a fantastic experience. Co-teaching was far more fulfilling than the traditional student-teaching model. We all benefited. I think the biggest benefit is that the students saw my co-teacher as a 'teacher' right from the start."

Closer examination of the data collected from teacher candidates led us to further examine the concept of being seen as a *real teacher* and articulate four specific skill areas in which these teacher candidates believe they excel as a result of their co-teaching experience.

- Enhanced collaboration and communication skills
- Deeper self-reflection and enhanced understanding of curriculum and pedagogy as a result of co-planning
- Enhanced classroom management skills
- Enhanced instructional leadership skills

To help illustrate the differences between a traditional and a co-teaching model of student teaching, this paper will share the collective thoughts and experiences of dozens of teacher candidates through the voices of two hypothetical student teachers. "Sara" will represent a candidate in a traditional student teaching setting, while "Alissa" will represent a teacher candidate in a co-teaching model of student teaching. As Sara and Alissa begin their student teaching, the differences in their experiences become apparent immediately.

**SARA (Traditional):** *I received my placement from the university and I nervously contacted my cooperating teacher hoping that we could meet prior to my beginning. I went to the school at the scheduled time and met with Ms. Z, she seemed really nice, but I'm not sure how excited she is about having me join her classroom. She said that she wanted me to observe for some time and then depending on how things go, I would be able to step in and help with some things. She did give me a copy of several of the books (science, math, and language arts) that the students would be using and encouraged me to look through them. When I asked her about introducing myself to the students, or if I would have a desk or space – she said "yeah, we'll work on that when you get here." But she finished the conversation by saying – remember you'll be the student teacher – this will still be my class.*

**ALISSA (Co-Teaching):** *I contacted my cooperating teacher as soon as I received my placement. She didn't have much time for a conversation on the phone, but we made arrangements to meet the following week after school. When I arrived to meet with Ms. T she was so positive and excited about having me join her and the class. She started right off by saying that we were going to co-teach and that she has signed us up for the pairs workshop. She gave me a seating chart, showed me the desk that I would have, told me to put together a letter that we'd send home to the parents, and invited me to display a bulletin board about myself for the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. WOW, I was amazed. We did talk about how she expected me to be a teacher – that the students would/should see me as a teacher and to be effective she expected me to begin right away taking on some teaching in the classroom. I am going to be co-teaching from the first day. Oh, she had already told the students that I'd be joining them – It was so exciting!*

As we follow Sara and Alissa through their student teaching experience their voices help illuminate the four skill areas that distinguish co-teaching from a traditional model of student teaching.

### ***Collaboration and Communication Skills***

The idea that we need to collaborate in order to succeed in today's world is not new. In fact, Suarez-Orozco & Sattin (2007) argue that the ability to work collaboratively in a variety of environments and with a variety of people is a key skill for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Educational settings, however, have been slow to recognize the need to teach collaboration skills to faculty and staff (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002, Jackson, 2004).

Marilyn Friend, an expert in education and collaboration, asserts that "Although some [education] professionals have intuitive collaboration skills, it is an error to assume that the skills should be naturally present; they must be carefully taught and nurtured" (Friend, 2000, p.132). Collaboration in student teaching relationships, however, can often be difficult to achieve due to the power differential that is inherent in the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate. This is due, in part, to the evaluative nature of the role of the cooperating teacher. This power differential in student teaching can create an impediment to successful co-teaching if it is not overtly addressed.

As teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors work together, success largely depends upon the skills to communicate and collaborate with one another. In the co-teaching model of student teaching, cooperating teachers and teacher candidates attend a workshop together in the first week of their shared experience, to learn specific collaboration, communication and co-planning strategies that will enhance the success of the student teaching experience for all involved. The difference in power between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates is overtly addressed, with cooperating teachers being provided specific methods by which they can minimize the power differential. Co-teaching pairs are challenged to find ways to immediately incorporate the teacher candidate in the classroom instruction using co-teaching strategies. Co-teaching pairs are also provided opportunities to practice communication skills paving the way for future success in communication. It is critical to the success of co-teaching for the teacher candidates to be empowered to have a voice not only in the planning process but also in dealing with difficult issues that naturally arise when working so closely with another adult. The cooperating teachers also practice dealing with difficult issues with time to process which strategies were most successful and why. Pairs are provided with a Collaborative Self-assessment Tool (CSAT) developed for the purpose of reflecting on their own collaboration skills (Ofstedal, Dahlberg, in press). Using the CSAT facilitates self-reflection and communication between co-teaching partners about insights gained and goals set relative to on-going development of collaboration skills.

By providing co-teaching pairs with specific strategies and practice in the art of communication and collaboration they are able to move past those first awkward incidents when things that don't go so smoothly need to be addressed. The co-teaching pair enters the student teaching experience with confidence that they will be able to navigate the ever-changing landscape of human interactions.

Our data indicate that teacher candidates believe that co-teaching during their student teaching experience enhanced their collaboration and communication skills. In end-of-experience surveys, 92.5% of teacher candidates (N=201) and 93.2% of cooperating teachers (N=279) responded that increased collaboration and communication skills were a benefit of co-teaching during student teaching.

One candidate wrote, "Communication is critical. Getting feedback from your cooperating teacher right away, not two weeks later is much better." Cooperating teachers also have commented on the benefits of enhanced collaboration through co-teaching. "A highlight of this co-teaching experience for me was watching how my teacher candidate started implementing some of my techniques in her teaching style and then realizing how I was implementing some of her techniques into my strategies. We really grew together!"

As our teacher candidates continue their student teaching, let's see how things are going:

**SARA (Traditional):** *I have been sitting back and only getting to pass out papers, do lunch count, and help with a few other things – it's sort of boring. Ms. Z talks to me about what is going on, but she pretty much tells me how things are done, doesn't really want to hear my thoughts, and just tells me what I should be doing. But today, Ms. Z asked me if I wanted to teach one of the math groups. I said yes, of course, she said great – and that was about it. I tried to ask her a couple of questions but she just said remember that the group would be working on the multiplication problems on pages 33-36. When I tried to show her what I was planning – she said she was sure it will be fine. She didn't even really look at the activity I developed, nor did she make any suggestions. After I taught*

*the lesson, I was really excited, because I thought it went pretty well. There were a couple of problems, and I certainly didn't have enough material for the amount of time – the kids did an amazing job of working on their multiplication, but when we were finished the other groups still had at least 5 minutes of work to do – I struggled and the kids got a lot noisier. But, eventually I remembered a silly game that I played in elementary school – at least I got them quieted down.*

*I'm glad I got to lead the Math lesson yesterday, because Ms. Z was sick today and so we had a sub – I felt totally useless since I didn't really know what we were doing. We always just discuss the upcoming day in the morning – I don't think she trusts me with more than one or two days of information. Anyway, the substitute had more information about what we were doing than I did. However, I have to say it was great because the sub asked me if I wanted to do the lesson – I said sure and after our morning meeting (which I always helped with anyway) I was in charge. Things went pretty well, but I would certainly have liked to talk to my cooperating teacher about this before it all started. I think I'm going to have to try to meet with her or talk to my supervisor about how we might talk more about all of this stuff.*

**ALISSA (Co-Teaching):** *Wow we just returned from the pairs workshop– it was great! I don't think my teacher and I got off to a great start – and it's mostly my fault because I didn't know how to talk to her. Well, after today I know we are going to have a great semester. I feel really good about working with her. We had to talk about some hypothetical tough situations at the workshop – and one of them was something I was really worried about. I couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to her – she really listened and made me feel like what I had to say mattered. She kept saying that this is “our” class. We spent time planning how we were going to co-teach next week, I am so psyched about this. I really feel like this is going to be amazing – the kids see us talking all the time and they see me as a “real teacher” not just a helper – they even ask me questions. We have already determined our co-planning time, and she asked me to write down any questions I have and come prepared to talk about them. I have spent so much time reading, talking and learning about 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. But, through all of it – the kids think I'm the teacher! Well, they see us both as teacher, but we spent 20 minutes every morning going over everything that we've planned. This science lesson that we collaborated on was such a hit that the other 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers want us to present it to their classes. After the science lesson we brainstormed some awesome ways to introduce it to the other classes. We're going to do what I suggested and I can't believe it – Although she is the paid teacher in the classroom – she has made it perfectly clear that I too am a teacher!*

### ***Deeper Self-Reflection and Enhanced Understanding of the Curriculum and Pedagogy as a Result of Co-Planning***

Dewey (1933) is widely acknowledged as the originator of the concept of reflection. Dewey recognized that learning does not occur simply by experiencing something. He believed that we learn best from experiences that we review, explore, ponder and question. Reflection involves a state of uncertainty which is followed by a search to resolve this doubt. Reflection, however, is more than just thinking hard about what you do (Bullough and Gitlin, 1995). Becoming reflective requires active engagement in the experience. According to Baratz-Snowden (1991), reflection is not an innate skill possessed by teachers. Teachers who think reflectively about their own teaching are better equipped to be lifelong learners (Lester, 1998). They also have a tendency to initiate changes in their existing practice through this reflective practice.

The opportunity to share with colleagues is important in becoming a more reflective practitioner. Feedback, comments, and discussion about reflections are enhanced when a cooperating teacher and teacher candidate engage in reflective work together. Rather than assuming a teacher candidate can figure out how a lesson went, cooperating teachers can guide candidates in critical reflection that can inform future teaching. At the same time, the teacher candidate becomes a partner in reflecting for the cooperating teacher, allowing the cooperating teacher to grow.

Cooperating teachers have a wealth of knowledge and skills about teaching and learning. This knowledge base increases each year as teachers gain experience. Veteran teachers often make teaching look effortless as they transition from one subject to the next, monitoring students and making adjustments in instruction as they go. Teaching, however, is anything but easy. Teachers make hundreds, perhaps thousands of decisions each day about what and how they are teaching.

These decisions are at the core of what makes a classroom work. Often when a teacher candidate enters the classroom, they watch their cooperating teacher and decide that teaching looks easy. Reality hits when they take over the classroom for a lesson and students run rampant and the lesson is disastrous. How many times has a teacher

candidate said “I don’t know what happened....I did it just like my cooperating teacher did but it didn’t work!” What candidates are missing is the invisible processes that occur to make the lesson successful. The wealth of knowledge the cooperating teacher possesses is the reason we place teacher candidates in certain classrooms. The ability of the cooperating teacher to share what they know is key to a successful student teaching experience. The thousands of decisions they make each day come so naturally to them that many cooperating teachers don’t even realize they are making them. It is imperative that cooperating teachers self reflect to determine how and why they make the decisions they do. This self reflection then allows them to verbally share their processes with their teacher candidate. The cooperating teacher makes the classroom workings visible. As one teacher candidate said: “I built a great relationship with my cooperating teacher and I feel that I could come to her as a support when I get a job. I loved having the planning time because I got to see exactly what goes through her mind while she's planning.”

Teacher candidates articulate three distinct benefits to the co-planning that occurs in co-teaching. The benefits delineated by teacher candidates include: enhanced understanding of the sequence and scope of curriculum, enhanced ability to see and understand the invisible art of teaching and deeper self-reflection. In end-of-experience surveys, 89.1% of teacher candidates (N=201) and 92.1% of cooperating teachers (N=279) responded that gaining a deeper understanding of the curriculum was a benefit of co-teaching. Likewise, 86.6% (N=201) of teacher candidates and 92.1% (N=279) of cooperating teachers saw having the opportunity for deeper reflection as a direct benefit of co-teaching.

Let’s see how Sara and Alissa are doing as they plan for instruction.

**SARA (Traditional):** *Well I’ve now been teaching most of the math, social, and reading for about a week. Wow, it feels so good to know I can survive a week. I’m supposed to take over everything starting next week – I’m not sure how I’m going to do it. I want to talk to Ms. Z about what kinds of things she thinks I should do – I have a bunch of ideas, but I’m afraid if I ask too many questions she won’t think I can handle it by myself. The planning part is so much work – my poor roommate – I make her brainstorm with me all the time about ideas that I want to use. She gives me good feedback, but obviously she doesn’t know the kids or what I’m really supposed to be doing. I have been reviewing the teacher’s guides and even went to the library to get some additional resources. In the lunch room yesterday one of the other 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers was asking me how things were going. Anyway, one thing led to another and we started talking about some of the things she does – I got some great ideas! I wish Ms. Z and I had those same conversations. She is always so nice when we talk, and I know she will help me no matter what – I just wish that we talked about the students and the lessons in a conversation – so it doesn’t always seem like she has the information and I’m trying to get it.*

**ALISSA (Co-Teaching):** *This has been a very busy and stressful week – not stressful in a bad way, just lots and lots to do. I led our entire planning session today. It felt great and Ms. T was amazing and so was the Para. They both made it so easy. We started like always with the communication questions and just talking about happenings in the classroom. Then I took over – I started by telling them what I had planned for our morning meeting (and what I wanted them to do), then I explained the stations we were going to do for our science lesson and what station they were going to lead. We had a great conversation about how each of them would do it – how much time we should have, etc. Next came the most difficult one because I have to begin teaching the mini-writing unit that we developed. I wanted each of them to work with different groups (we’re using a sort of combination of two of the co-teaching models) anyway, they loved my ideas. They both said it was a great way to really meet the needs of the kids. We’re each working with different groups and doing it very differently – I can’t wait. The rest of the subjects went really easy – I’m doing some solo teaching so I just shared with them my plans, and we talked about how we were going to co-teaching the social studies class using a third co-teaching strategy. I am so thankful that Ms. T has been so open and made me feel such a part of the class from the start – I feel like I really know the kids needs, and what is expected of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. When I have a question she makes it so easy for me to ask it. It felt so good to be in charge and have them both understand what I wanted them to do – but even more, for them to like what I planned!*

*I have learned so much about myself through this journaling assignment. It has helped me to look deeply into what I find is important. I even share it with my cooperating teacher so she knows what I’m thinking. It has really added to the conversations that we have – in fact she talked about how important journaling was in her first couple of years teaching, how much she has learned from re-reading those. In fact, I think she has started journaling again.*

Managing a classroom consistently arises as one of the major concerns of teacher candidates as they enter their student teaching experience (Latz, 1992; Sibert, 2005; Smith, 2000). Despite university course work that is intended to help them with management issues, teacher candidates often feel unprepared to meet the reality of managing a classroom. Few in the field of teacher preparation would disagree that classroom management issues continue to challenge preservice teachers (Smith, 2000). Prospective teachers come to student teaching with many of their classroom management beliefs and practices already predetermined based in part on their personalities and experiences. Student teaching is typically the first time a preservice teacher will have complete control of a classroom. However, the preservice teacher brings their beliefs into a classroom where there are already established rules and unknown faces.

In a more traditional student teaching model, teacher candidates gradually assume managing the classroom. Regardless if it is the teacher candidate or the cooperating teacher that is in charge, the other teacher tends to be a passive bystander, allowing the teacher in charge to handle all of the management issues. In co-teaching, both teachers are actively engaged in the classrooms and become a part of classroom management.

In the end-of-experience surveys, 93.5% of teacher candidates (N=201) and 90.3% of cooperating teachers found improved classroom management skills to be a benefit to utilizing a co-teaching model of student teaching. As one cooperating teacher noted, "It is so helpful to have two adults reinforcing good behavior and redirecting poor choices." Even students have noted the difference with one elementary student saying "With both teachers, it gets orderly really fast. With one student teacher in the room, it goes hectic"; while a secondary students noted "Yes, behavior is different. For example, if the teacher is up front, busy giving her lesson, she can't go away from that and stop students talking. So when someone is standing right next to you, you tend not to talk." One elementary student even went as far as saying "It feels safer with two teachers". Another student noted: "Well, when teacher's talking, or teaching, the other one can go around and make sure they're paying attention and not stop the whole lesson just to make sure that other kids are paying attention. So that's kinda nice that she doesn't have to stop the lesson."

Let's check in on Sara and Alissa.

**SARA (Traditional):** *Ms. Z has let me do a lot more in the classroom. I'm teaching more and more but when she's in the room the kids don't push it and if they do she steps in immediately. I feel like I'm one step behind all the time. Ms. Z. has been leaving me alone to teach a lot now and I love being able to be in charge, unfortunately, when she does the kids don't react so well. If they know she's going to be gone for a long time – they act like they think I'm a sub or something. They don't want to behave for me and they certainly don't listen to me like they do to her. I have tried to do the same things that she does – use the name on the board, move closer to those kids that are misbehaving, and I have even used a lot more praise for positive behavior. They're not terrible, but they test me all the time and I'm not even sure exactly what the rules are sometimes. I got really upset with them and raised my voice – that helped, but only for a little while, then they were back to being too noisy. I even moved a couple of kids and nothing seemed to keep them quiet. I was mortified when the principal walked by and they were working in groups and being really loud. I had to stop the activity, get them all back in their seats and go over the rules again. I've got to try something new. Hopefully she'll think it's a good idea, or maybe she'll share some ideas that might help.*

**ALISSA (Co-Teaching):** *Being the lead is wonderful! When we talked this week about my leading a lesson in math, Ms. T. said that she was going to step out for a bit and see how the kids responded to me being alone. She wasn't going to say anything to them – just quietly slip out. She asked me what I thought about having our Para (Jen) take a few notes on how the kids behaved and how they responded, what I said, etc. Just the way she talked about it – she wasn't saying it to spy on me she suggested it more so we could talk about management strategies. She always says that I can't be a clone of her and the way she does things, I need to figure out (and test) strategies that will work for me as a teacher. Anyway, she left and I think because they already see me as a teacher – nothing much changed. Oh at first I think a couple of kids raised their hands and asked where Ms. T. went – but other than the usual noise and kids getting out of their seats – nothing changed. I don't think that would have happened if I wasn't co-teaching. These kids think I belong here and since I've been able to be such a big part of all the teaching that goes on, I haven't ever felt that they wouldn't listen to me – talk about a confidence builder!*

The role of the teacher as instructional leader is undisputed. There has been some debate in recent years about what makes a highly qualified teacher, but there has been no debate about the fact that the teacher is the instructional leader. As our classrooms change and educational reforms abound, the role of the teacher has begun to expand. Today's teachers need to be able to diagnose learner needs, develop lessons and learning strategies to meet those needs, facilitate and assess student learning, participate in school governance and help allocate the human resources needed to meet identified student needs (Wallace, et al., 2001).

In order to meet student needs, schools have become increasingly reliant on student support from non-licensed personnel. Most public elementary and secondary schools have instructional paraprofessionals who are responsible for assisting in the delivery of instruction (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In fact, 91% of traditional public schools in 2003-2004 had instructional paraprofessionals. With 12% of the full-time-equivalents (FTE's) in our nation's schools being instructional paraprofessionals compared to 50% of the FTE's being teachers (NCES, 2007), it is inevitable that our newest teachers will at some time in the not so distant future, be faced with having to work with another adult in their classroom.

Whether working with an instructional paraprofessional, a parent volunteer or a licensed specialist, today's teachers need specific instructional leadership skills. Teachers, however, report little preservice or inservice preparation for effectively working with paraprofessionals (French 2001), and are often uncomfortable directing and delegating responsibilities to another adult (Pickett, et al., 1993). Wallace, et al. (2001) found that sometimes teachers reflect on why they wanted to become teachers in the first place and they report that it was not to supervise adults; but that this is becoming the reality in education today. The co-teaching model of student teaching affords teacher candidates an opportunity to begin to develop some of the skills they will need in working with other adults in their own classrooms whether they are instructional paraprofessionals, parent volunteers or licensed colleagues. As the teacher candidates take over the leadership of the planning and instruction, they find themselves in the unique position of having to delegate tasks and activities to other adults in the classroom, including their cooperating teacher. While some of their instructional time is spent solo teaching, teacher candidates are also expected to plan and utilize co-teaching strategies in appropriate lessons during this time. During a focus group interview, one teacher candidate said, "I am so glad that I did co-teaching, because now I have more skills when it comes to working with people. When I go out there and I have paraprofessionals or possibly other teachers that I need to work together with, I can handle that now. I don't think I could have done that nearly as comfortably before my co-teaching experience." A cooperating teacher echoed that sentiment by stating, "Watching my teacher candidate grow in all aspects of the teaching job was rewarding. Teaching is no longer a solo job, so learning how to delegate and use her resources is so essential! The co-teaching model gives candidates an opportunity to grow in all aspects of the job."

Another benefit of participating in a co-teaching experience is the increased confidence that results from the mentoring relationship that develops between teacher candidate and cooperating teacher. By taking the lead in planning, assessment and instruction, teacher candidates report that their confidence as a teacher increases. They have had time to practice the art of teaching with feedback and support from a master teacher, and find that as a result, they are more confident in their ability to step into a full-time teaching position. One teacher candidate summed it up by saying, "Co-teaching enhanced my own self-esteem in the classroom. It made me feel more like I was part of everything that went on in the classroom. It also made my relationship closer with my cooperating teacher." Cooperating teachers also comment on the enhanced confidence of teacher candidates, "I think co-teaching aligns itself to helping them be more competent more quickly because they don't feel like they're just out there alone. They've got that support right from the beginning. They feel like they're teaming instead of being observed all the time."

In the end of experience surveys, 86.3% of teacher candidates (N=201) and 90.7% of cooperating teachers (N=279) found enhanced leadership skills to be a benefit for teacher candidates participating in co-teaching during student teaching. Respondents were also asked about increased confidence of teacher candidates, with 88.6% of teacher candidates (N=201) and 91.4% of cooperating teachers (N=279) finding this to be a benefit of co-teaching.

Let's see how Sara and Alissa are doing.

***SARA (Traditional):** I have really enjoyed my student teaching and I do think that I'm ready to have my own classroom. But, I sort of felt like I just did what I was told – I didn't get to really do anything really creative. I had a lot of great ideas and I can't wait to get my own classroom to try them out. I wished I could have tried them here with someone else to talk through them with, but that hasn't worked out. I have several things that*



*I'd like to talk over with Ms. Z. but I'm a bit nervous since I'm hoping she'll write me a letter of recommendation. I really liked her and I think we got along well – I just don't think she sees me as a "real teacher" and I don't know if I demonstrated my abilities all that well. I know I could have done more to step to the plate, but its scary when you know they have to grade you and that you're counting on a letter of recommendation. I wanted to ask about going to all the grade level meetings (I went to some, but she said that some wouldn't apply to me) as I'm sure I would have learned a lot; I wanted to sit in on an IEP meeting or at least participate when the students' parents came in to meet about the tests that were recommended. Anyway, all in all it was a great experience – I hope I'm ready – I hope she thinks I am!*

**ALISSA (Co-Teaching):** *I can't believe how fast my student teaching has gone. I'm exhausted but in a very good way. This has been unbelievable! I never felt like I didn't belong, I was a part of things from the very beginning. After being the co-teacher and helping with most things I got to be the lead teacher planning what and how things would go – I eventually even found comfort telling my Ms. T. and the Para's what I needed them to do – I never thought I would be able to plan and organize everyone – but what an experience. I not only feel like I fit in in the classroom, I fit in with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade team and the whole school. I can't wait to have my own class. We had a staff meeting this morning before school and all the teachers were brainstorming some ways to work with the local parent organization – I had some ideas, and evidently I looked like I wanted to share – well when the principal asked me to share, I did – it felt good and nobody acted like I was out of place. Some of the teachers even came up afterwards and said what good ideas they were. It feels so good to belong and feel welcomed. I can't believe I'm almost done – I'm going to miss my Ms. T and these students so much. I have had the most incredible experience and I feel completely ready to have my own classroom. I even feel like I know how to use the Para's and other adults that come into my room.*

### **Summary**

There have been many changes in the field of education over the past century. As we develop new learning theories, new practices emerge that align pedagogy and knowledge. There is a currently a wide body of research that recognizes the importance and benefits of mentoring new teachers as they enter the field. (New Teacher Center, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000). It only makes sense that we also examine the need to mentor teacher candidates as they embark on their journey to becoming a teacher. The student teaching experience has long been accepted as the rite of passage from student to licensed professional. It would follow that we need to support and mentor these teacher candidates as they begin practice their craft.

Sara and Alissa's journey has helped to illustrate the differences between a traditional and a co-teaching model of student teaching. A successful student teaching experience is built upon a developing a strong relationship between the teacher candidate and the cooperating teacher. In the traditional model of student teaching, a great deal of mental energy is used in the first few weeks trying to figure out your teaching partner's philosophy of education, teaching style, body language and thought processes. The co-teaching model of student teaching prepares the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate to "work together in a classroom with groups of students sharing the planning, organization, delivery, and assessment of instruction, as well as the physical space" (Heck, et.al, 2006). It is as though they perform a type of dance, where both co-teachers sometimes lead and sometimes follow.

Teaching has become an incredibly complex and demanding profession (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Danielson, C., 1996). While we don't offer our teacher candidates a "white coat" to give them the credibility they need to succeed in their practice experience, we can provide them with other tools that make the transition from student to teacher much smoother and perhaps more meaningful. By shifting from a traditional model of student teaching to a co-teaching model, we no longer expect our teacher candidates to learn this complex art of teaching by leaving them alone to sink or swim. Instead we provide them with the involvement, preparation, leadership opportunities, modeling and coaching they need to enter their own classroom with confidence and skill.

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