

THE IMPACT OF COOPERATING TEACHERS ON THE TEACHING PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT TEACHERS

by Derek L. Anderson

The student teaching practicum, when the student teachers are in classrooms working under “cooperating teachers” who agree to provide the student teachers with guidance, is the capstone event of a new teacher’s formal education and shapes the beginnings of one’s foray into the teaching profession. Little is known, however, about the ways in which cooperating teachers influence or change the teaching actions, intentions, and beliefs, or “perspectives” of student teachers. Through a mixed methods design which used multiple data collection and analysis procedures, this study was designed to better understand sources of influence on student teachers and the role cooperating teachers’ power held in the relationships between the student teachers and their cooperating teachers. It is critical to better understand ways in which student teachers are influenced during the practicum since this serves as a key phase of induction into the teaching profession. High levels of new teacher attrition in the first five years post-graduation and recent criticisms of colleges for failing to produce high-quality teachers highlight how critical it is to improve new teachers’ orientation to the profession.

The participating student teachers and cooperating teachers from a Midwestern University with an enrollment approximately 10,000 students took the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (Pratt & Collins, 2001) before and after the practicum experience. Descriptive statistics were performed to determine if student teachers changed their initial dominant categories of teaching perspectives, which are determined by the perspective score that is at least one standard deviation above the mean of all five perspective scores. In addition, pre-practicum and post-practicum questionnaires were administered to record expectations, influences on

teaching, and approaches to teaching. Means were calculated on each variable and cross tabulations performed to determine if any of these variables were statistically significant influences on changes in teaching perspectives. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 teams of cooperating teachers and student teachers, half of which had student teachers who changed perspectives and half of which had student teachers who did not change perspectives.

The data revealed that approximately half of the student teachers reported changes in numerical measures of their teaching perspectives – a combination of their actions, intentions, and beliefs on teaching, though nearly all student teachers and cooperating teachers reported anecdotal or experiential ways in which the student teachers changed. Of those who did change, about a quarter changed their dominant perspectives to match more closely the dominant perspectives of their cooperating teachers. Student teachers most commonly cited their cooperating teachers as having had an impact on their changes. Cooperating teachers were found to exercise power over their student teachers through their evaluations, rewards, distribution of knowledge, vested authority, and charisma. In addition, generational differences appeared to play a role in the student teachers' unmet expectations. Few student teacher/cooperating teacher partnerships could be classified as effective mentorships as most student teachers did not receive the frequency and depth of feedback and guidance they desired.

The results of this study indicate a need to clarify expectations of both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher prior to the practicum experience. Cooperating teachers indicated practical classroom management goals for their student teachers and focused on organizational skills and discipline. Student teachers, on the other hand, indicated an increased awareness of the complex role of the classroom teacher and the need to focus on student learning. Missing from

the practicum experience was the opportunity for in-depth discussion and reflections on the practice of teaching.